Daisy's Adventures 2: Return to Sarasaland

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A week after the events of "Elemental Odyssey," the Kruna of Earth makes a return to Sarasaland and is thrust into a multi-sided conflict! With powerful enemies and monsters on every side and a limitless embodiment of pure evil watching her every move, her very morality is strained! The harrowing saga continues, putting everyone's fate into question! The Kruna have to pull through!

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Chapter I

Return to Sarasaland

The Deep Wood :

For centuries, the lost forests of Sarasaland have been shrouded in the deepest mysteries and most obscene superstitions. The remote inner woodland that exists past the great range of bamboo towards the northeast in the Chai Kingdom has garnered a particularly sinister reputation. Some say it's a hostile place, inhabited by not only the most bizarre creatures ever conceived but the most vicious. Others say that it serves as an isolated gathering area for Sarasaland's most dangerous criminals. There is even rumor of cannibals who take up residence in the interior forestry who snatch anyone daring enough to venture within the radius of their territory. The biggest conspiracy theorists say that the government of Sarasaland has had a secret base set up within the forest and has been killing off its residents as a way to enforce population control. Legend has it that those that are unfortunate enough or foolish enough to traverse through this treacherous region disappear completely, never to be heard from again. Hundreds of thousands of people of all walks, races, classes, nobilities, and professions have fallen victim to the inescapable vortex that is known colloquially as "The Deep Wood." No communications, no search parties, not even Sarasaland's finest police and cavalry have ever been able to so much as even get a clue as to the whereabouts of the missing.

A mother and her son had progressed through the bamboo forest, looking for a great place to set up a peaceful picnic. The parent and child started experiencing apprehension about their decision once they realized that the trees around them became ever more crooked and comically saturated in color as they continued their walk. The strange echoes of unidentifiable sounds failed to offer reassurance to the two, and the bizarre abundance of orange, purple, and red pigmentation throughout the environment only added to the oddity of their surroundings. Yet, they continued walking as if they were somehow drawn to something within The Deep Wood.

Fear – the feeling they felt upon hearing an otherwordly growl that shuttled through the air.

Panic – the reaction they had upon seeing several pairs of red, angled eyes at random intervals of time.

Uncertainty – the state of mind that pervaded their thoughts as they found themselves bound to continue on their way.

Demise – the only outcome once the ravenous hellhounds leapt forward from the bushes and pounced on the defenseless intruders. The mother was able to twist herself just out of the reach of the demonic creatures, but the boy however, not yet developed in his judgment or instincts was quickly wrestled to the ground and dragged off into the mask of shrubbery. Self-preservation violently overtook her mind as she made the decision to try and escape the inescapable, completely forgetting about her only child. Her flight did not last long, as her pursuers were quick, cunning, and relentless in following her. The hellhounds chased her down, caught her by her ankles, and pulled her off to within the sickly looking underbrush. Not a single trace from her nor her son was left behind, apart from her screams of terror and regret. Even her peril eventually ceased though, and The Deep Wood once again grew silent.

"Yes, what is it, Vastus?" asked King Sarasa, sitting atop his magnificent throne in Sarasaland's Central Castle. "This better be good if it warrants the police commissioner's visit this late in the day."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but we have been receiving reports of mysterious disappearances now for almost three consecutive months!" Vastus answered. He stood across from the king and his brightly decorated and ostentatious orange and silver robes that accentuated his black pants and orange boots. The king's absurdly golden crown seemed to shine brighter every time Vastus saw him. The difference was made even more apparent compared to the police commissioner's relatively tired and dingy silver and black uniform.

"What's the problem then, police commissioner?" the king questioned, somewhat bored in his delivery. "Citizens have been disappearing before I even took to the throne. Why is that an issue? Has it sent our economy tumbling? Has it harmed our military might in any way? If the answer to either of these is no, then you are clearly wasting my time as much as you are wasting your breath."

Vastus tried his best to keep his upright composure. "But sir, our people are becoming very edgy, filling with panic and fear!"

King Sarasa cupped his chin into one of his hands. "Let them fear, let them panic. It's really not an issue."

"Well, that's the thing. People are starting to question the stability of the Central Castle. There's many that are speculating that we're the ones behind all the missing citizens. I think they may try to start a rally that could break out into a riot!"

"So? This should already be a given, police commissioner. They're obviously traitors, mischievous little runts who only seek to cause stirs and uprisings. Lock them up, for they are enemies to Sarasaland. They've probably been plotting against us for quite a while now. Weeks, months, years, who knows."

Vastus rubbed the back of his head. "I don't blame them, Your Highness. I mean, I would be upset too if ninety percent of the wealth of Sarasaland was concentrated here in the Central Castle. These people must feel oppressed-"

"If you value what's left of your life, you will bite your tongue with enough force to break through a whomp before you utter anything out of turn," the king coldly snarled.

"Yes sir, but it has really gotten out of hand, and-"

"And nothing!" the king boomed. "They're my people. This is my land. If they have problems, that's too bad, because I'm in control. They have food, shelter, clothing, and residence in what will soon be a historic empire that will transcend boundaries once thought permanent. They should stop being ungrateful and appreciate what I have blessed them with."

"I'm sorry, sir," Vastus murmured, his head and gaze angled down at the floor.

"You should be, commissioner," King Sarasa muttered. "Now get out of here. Come back with something of significance to report next time or you'll be relieved of your duties."

Two koopas walked into a bedroom in Bowser's Palace; the very room that Daisy had previously used before setting off on her next journey. It had been nearly a week since she left the Mushroom Kingdom. In fact, none of the Kruna were in the Mushroom Kingdom or anywhere near it at this present time. Bowser's Palace had been left in the hands of the koopas that lived there with him.

"C'mon man, you know we gotta clean out these guest rooms eventually," said the first koopa. "I mean, we just gotta vaccum and strip the bed, so why not now? You know Bowser's gonna be upset if he comes back and these rooms haven't been tended to."

The second koopa nodded. "Yeah, I'm just being lazy. You know, it's a strange move for Bowser to call off all of our operations against the Mushroom Kingdom, especially after all we've been through quarreling against those guys. It feels pretty nice though, all these tensions wavering and all."

"He said he'd tell us about them later when he got the chance," replied the first koopa, plugging the vacuum into one of the outlets. "I agree, it is weird. I mean, for Princess Toadstool to voluntarily come here by herself in the early morning and eat breakfast here? I'm still surprised by that."

The second koopa went to take the sheets off the bed, but stopped and bent down to pick something up. "Looks like Daisy left something here. I mean really, first she leaves her backpack here – but it seems she's taken it this time – and now she leaves..." He paused, examining the paper in his hand. "Is this a map?"

"Gimme that," said the first koopa, snatching the paper from his counterpart. "Well, this is indeed a map."

"What'dya think it was; a mirror?"

The first koopa cocked an eyebrow. "Hey, were you not the one that just asked if it was a map?" He studied the piece of paper closer. "Eastern Continent... She's circled some place, and if I'm not mistaken, it looks like it's...Sarasaland." He looked up from the map. "Why Sarasaland?"

The second koopa shrugged. "We'll have to show this to Bowser when he gets back. He might know what this means."

"You there!"

"What?! Me?!" asked Koops, trembling and shaking on the sidewalk in the outskirts of Toad Town.

"Yes," Kokoro smoothly answered, walking towards the blue-clothed koopa. The shadows caused by the sunset sky added to his sinister appearance. "There is an earth wielder here in typical earth wielder garb; black shirt and black pants with silver trim. She's got medium-length red hair, blue eyes – under normal circumstances – and is lean with well-developed musculature. She's probably less than a buck-fifty, and about 5'9" with a raspy voice. An *annoying* , voice at that." He grabbed and pulled up Koops by the neck of his hoodie. "Now tell me where she is!"

"I don't now man; I just got here!" Koops cried out, flailing his legs.

Kokoro sighed. "Okay, brown hair. Take your pick, I really don't give a damn."

"Oh come on! What did I do to you man?" Koops hollered.

"Look – I DON'T have the patience for you, anthropomorphic turtle," the Soul Stealer scowled. "Certain Nova Form Sarasa scum must be dealt with, and so help me if you hold me up any longer, my face will be the last thing your vision registers – now have you seen the wretched woman or not?!"

Koops grimaced, submitting to powerlessness. "NO! I don't know

who you're talking about!"

The Soul Stealer started growling, forming a light sphere in his other claw. "Alright then...you know what." He tightened his grip on Koops, eliciting a terrified squeal from the koopa. "That makes you about as expendable as air!" Kokoro flicked Koops from his grasp, sending the koopa skidding a couple dozen yards away from him along the ground. The Soul Stealer moved to bring his hand forward to fire off his attack at the koopa, but stopped. Koops came to a rest at the feet of two renowned elemental wielders. He looked up to see Mario and Luigi, hammers strapped across their backs. Kokoro dismissed the light sphere from his hand, frowning with malice.

"Mario!" Koops exclaimed. He bolted back to his feet and slapped fives with the fire wielding plumber. "How's it going bro?"

"Koops!" Mario hollered. "What are you doing here? How's Koopie Koo? And Petalburg?"

"I had to come visit you bro!" Koops shouted. "But this guy showed up and started being mean for no reason!"

Mario and Luigi took another gander at the Soul Stealer, but exchanged puzzled looks with each other when they could not recognize who he was. In the same vein, Kokoro looked at the Mario Bros with bitter impatience and nonchalance.

"I assure you, I had all the reason I needed," Kokoro grumbled. He was mostly the same as he was when he battled Daisy; a horrific being standing six and a half feet tall, slender yet masculine build, smooth, hard scales that were brown with a purple shine in place of skin. His apparel was the same as well, being his gold and dark brown form-fitting tunic, his black-belted gunmetal gray shorts, and his brown shoes. His case-like bone structure protruding along the whole length and circumference of his arms, claws, legs, and neck managed to invoke a visceral response from Luigi just as much as the Soul Stealer's vampiric, periwinkle face and eyes. The only real difference between Kokoro now and his appearance at the Ice Shrine was the cybernetic brace and attachments around his right elbow; the elbow that Daisy crushed when in her Nova Form. "Kokoro is my name. I'm looking for someone...special. Stay out of

my way or perish."

"Then you must be looking for us, troublemaker!" Luigi yelled. Fire and air elementals began to flow around Mario and Luigi's fingertips, a gesture that evoked an amused grin from Kokoro.

"No, I'm actually not," the Soul Stealer replied.

"Well you've found us regardless!" Mario exclaimed, intensifying the flames around his hands.

"How adorable," Kokoro said.

"Adorable?" Luigi repeated, crafting a spheroid of winds in his palm.

"And that's just precious!" Kokoro taunted, unimpressed. "Look, I'm in the middle of something more important than...whatever this is. So if you just wanna get the hell outta here so I can track down someone more significant, that would be wonderful."

"More significant?" Luigi asked in confusion. "Don't you know who we are? We're Mario and Luigi!"

Kokoro stared with a blank face, finding the crickets chirping more interesting than the two plumbers standing before him. "Riveting – okay, anyways! I don't want to have to waste energy snuffing you all out of existence, even though you've wasted a good chunk of my time already, so if you could tell me where I can find Daisy Sarasa...I'll begrudgingly let you all walk away living."

"Daisy?" Luigi asked. "Why her? What did she do?"

"Are you trying to kidnap her?" Mario asked with a grimace.

Kokoro's eyes flared open in surprise. "Kidnap? What? No! What purpose do I have kidnapping somebody? That's just stupid! Why would you even suggest that? I'm just gonna kill her on the spot! Kidnapping? Please!"

Mario and Luigi both looked at each other, dumbstruck by Kokoro's response.

Kokoro went back to grinning at the plumbers. "Yes, now, Mario and...Loogie, was it?"

"LUIGI!" the air wielder corrected.

"Sure," Kokoro condescendingly replied. "Since you obviously don't know where she is, I think I will be on my way-"

"Twin Dragon Flame!" Mario yelled, forcing out from his hands two large tendrils of white-hot fire that revolved around each other as they flew towards the Soul Stealer. Kokoro put out his undamaged arm to block, deflecting both flames upwards the instant they touched his hand.

"What?!" Mario shouted in shock. Luigi interlaced his mass of winds with lightning and hurled it at Kokoro, at the same time pulling out his hammer. Kokoro actually caught Luigi's attack and wound up to throw it back at him, much to the air wielder's own surprise. Luigi originally intended to spin around and throw his hammer at the archfiend, but was forced to be defensive and bat away the incoming projectile Kokoro threw back at him.

"That's cute," Kokoro cooed, sarcasm evident. "Now you are you quite done?!"

"Okay bro, seriously; what has Daisy been up to?!" Luigi asked Mario.

"I know as much as you know," said Mario. "And again, she's not even here for her to tell us anything!"

Kokoro perked up in anger. "Huh?!"

Luigi put a hand on his forehead. "Man, this is all really strange! First, Bowser's not our enemy, and now this guy in front of us shows up outta nowhere!"

"What if Bowser's just trying to trick us?" Mario wondered aloud.

"No way!" Luigi refuted. "Don't you remember his demeanor from a week ago? It's still weird, but I'm all but convinced that the Koopa King's not against us!"

Kokoro was blissfully ignoring the rambling of the Mario Bros, lost in thought. *I could have sworn my tracking spell said to come here, but if she's really not here – and now that I think of it, I can't sense her presence – then there's one place she's very likely to be. Heh, she must have finally decided to face daddy. Or if she's smart, she'll steal the kingdom from King Sarasa and rule with an iron fist instead of using a Crystal Fist for useless acts of heroism. But no; Terran's poisoned her mind with his foolish drivel of 'honor' and 'respect'. That's quite alright, because I'll be the one that gets the kill for both the king and his daughter.* He started chuckling to himself. *They will both literally be skull dragged until the tops of their heads are ripped off and pouring red all over the ground...*

"Hey you!" Mario called out at the Soul Stealer. "Are you working for Bowser?"

Kokoro just stared, split between dismissing the two plumbers as ignorant or as annoying. "Okay I'm done with this," he flatly said, forming and chucking a sphere of light high into the air. "LUMINOUS SPARK!" At its apex, the light energy imploded and then reversed its direction and exploded outwards. The result was a blinding wave of white light that Mario, Luigi, and Koops all had to cover their eyes to shield against. After several moments, the light faded away and their vision slowly returned, but Kokoro was nowhere to be found.

"What was that?!" Luigi screamed, rubbing his eyes. "It was like someone brought the sun way too close to the planet!"

"Well, he's obviously a light wielder," Mario muttered, rapidly blinking to restore his vision.

"You don't know him?" asked Koops, scratching his cheek.

Mario shook his head. "Never seen him before in my life. But apparently, he knows Daisy, so Daisy must know him. He's probably going after her as we speak!"

"Who's Daisy?" Koops asked.

"Someone we should probably pay more attention to," replied Mario. "That guy is powerful – so either Daisy's really in trouble...or we've

been grossly underestimating her this whole time."

"That doesn't change the fact that we still don't know where she went!" added Luigi. "We never know where she goes!"

Mario took a deep breath, pressing one of his hands to his forehead. "Well, we have no leads. All we can do now is hope that she doesn't run into him. I'd hate to say that because it makes us sound like we're defeatists, but we are in no position to do anything here!"

Chapter II

Voyage of Fate :

The sun shone down on the tree-laden path that Daisy walked on. She was nearing her destination after a long travel with minimal rest, a destination she was bound to return to. She did not allow herself any significant recovery from the elemental odyssey that she and her team of Kruna were on only a week ago, instead opting to leave and arrive at Sarasaland soon as possible while making sure that no one followed her. To her, what she needed to accomplish in her old home was something only she could do. After all, it was her parents that were the rulers of the land. However things would turn out, she decided that she didn't want anyone else involved in this endeavor. There was no telling what she might walk into after about five years of absence from Sarasaland.

What was it that I truly lost that night ten years ago; that one night when Terran and I tried to run away? she mused, continuing her trek down the path. *Under the blanket of the night, the two of us thought we'd be unnoticeable, that we'd leave and wouldn't return home. Except, he got away, and I didn't.*

She looked around, not breaking her stride. It was a relatively cold day in what she barely recognized to be a section of the Chai Kingdom, one of the constituent kingdoms of Sarasaland. Her earth black apparel managed to hold in some some heat even though she was dressed lightly, but the cool air didn't bother her at all. It actually felt as therapeutic as it was refreshing. Although she liked the sun, she was not too fond of heat at did however equip a black hand warmer to her waist prior to her departure from the Mushroom Kingdom. It was something she used for cold weather sports, but she brought it along with her just to make sure that the cold air didn't mess with her ability to articulate her fingers once the temperature began to drop closer to the freezing point. It had her first and last initials on the upper left portion of its nylon shell in white, overlapping characters. Having her hands even the slightest second slow to respond was not something she could allow in this territory

on this mission.

How much of my life paralleled yours, Master? How much did you have to experience that I had to experience? Daisy wondered. *You didn't say, but I hope that my father didn't screw with your life the same way he ruined Elkon's life. I was completely ignorant of what you were doing with Elkon, dad. I was completely ignorant of the crimes you were forcing him to commit. I can't even imagine what it must've been like for you, Elkon, to be forced onto the battlefield fighting someone else's selfish battles, accumulating a death toll on your hands fighting for something you didn't believe in.* She clenched her fists, anger and sadness boiling inside of her and creating a cocktail of emotional energy. *Grekka, your broken and fragile heart bled in Kareah, crying for liberation with no way out, covered and hidden by a society that gave you nothing but hate. Now you're all dead, but, maybe it was never supposed to be that way.*

Daisy checked the scar on her chest as she continued walking down the road. Warra's healing water aided in suppressing its sensitivity to pain, but it looked almost unchanged. He did say that her scar may end up staying there for the rest of her life.

Faceless, hopeless, soulless, what a fate, she thought. *Grekka, Elkon, none of your words are lost on me, never; I came so close to leading a life all too similar to yours. You all aren't in this world anymore, but I will fight on, and break through the pain barrier. I will break through that barrier that broke you.*

Daisy closed her eyes, continuing to walk down the path without the use of her sense of sight. Suddenly, she wasn't just walking down a path. She could see herself treading through the expansive river of time, a river that was always moving and never clear. It was a river that no one was able to read; its endpoint undefined. *The water that is reality continues to become duller and murkier, even with my ascension to the status of Kruna. The faded horizon is drifting further away, as the world around me continues to decay and suffocate. The tyrants and corrupt continue to shape the world with wickedness and destruction's reverberating shockwaves. I'm surrounded by hatred, but there's no way in Hell that I ever had any intention to run. For my own blood to spill is of no ill to me. I'll bleed out these tears*

and take all this pain, even if my path is to fight in vain. I'll be fighting for the right cause, and that's all that matters if I should ever fail, but I will fight with the intention to win. If I must fight for all eternity, then I'll prevail through the uncertainty.

The river in Daisy's vision did not seem like a one way path. It appeared much more open, expanding in all directions with no clear boundaries if any at all. *Maybe this isn't a river, but an ocean; an endless ocean with each individual choice we make shifting us onto a different path. But what's lost in translation is that not everyone has that freedom of choice, no matter how much we may believe so. These waters are turbulent, because there are things deep down causing the ocean-wide disturbance.* She took a deep breath, an anesthetizing breath that relaxed her to the point of partial numbness. *I'm taking my last breath, because now, I'm heading down to the bottom of the ocean. Now I'm heading down into an abyss to put those disturbances to rest, and I may not ever resurface. Terran, you always thought I was strong; stronger than anyone else, and stronger than you, the very person who helped me craft my earth wielding. Is this something that you knew I would have to deal with, Master? When you realized how much I had grown when you reached out from the Scroll of Souls, were you able to determine how much I would be able to accomplish? Or was my ability something that you knew all along from the beginning? Man... What was it that I truly lost that night a decade ago? Or did I lose anything at all? What was it that I gained that night? Or was it nothing that I gained in the past that I didn't already have... but rather a present realization...*

Her vision of the endless ocean faded as she reopened her eyes to find that she had not deviated off course from the path. She was able to keep straight on her way even without her eyesight. *I used to wonder if I was dead or alive when I was younger, feeling like I had no control over my own life. But now, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind that I am alive. With the weight of the world on my back and shoulders, I have to play my part in bringing in the future that we both believe in, Elkon. It's the vision of that future that will keep me going, the name I must define with the way I live my life will keep me from failing and keep me upright, the name that will determine how far I will actually go... So I've got to keep fighting to the finish. No*

rest... No rest until I can finally come to realize the light at the end... Whatever I have to go through... However long that takes...

Rosalina and Athelstan stood in the Comet Observatory's immense archives. True to her word, the Elder of the Cosmos transported the Kruna of Stone here to allow him the opportunity to view records that could help him and his team in the future. As was explained before, it was only at the Comet Observatory that he would be able to obtain the records he was after; information on the Pendants of Power.

"Our Cosmic Archives have an exhaustive amount of information on not just the planet but the galaxy as a whole," Rosalina explained. "It should be noted however, that I only brought you here to show you what you asked for. Such knowledge of the universe beyond your world is off limits to all but a select handful of individuals few and far between, and only then when the situation calls for it." She smiled and shifted her gaze to the ceiling. "Then again, if you ever got bored with your role in the Kallantown Archives, I could vouch for a spot here for you, Kruna."

"We'll have to see what happens in the future regarding that," Athelstan remarked, gazing at the vast expanse of shelves, books, and technology rivaling that which the Kruna saw in Elkon's Final Fortress.

"Well, you have time to mull over it," the Elder of the Cosmos replied. "You're twenty-seven, correct? You and Bowser are the oldest of the Kruna, it seems. A position here will always be an option for you later on if you do choose to take that route. Stone wielders have had a penchant for being some of the best historians and scientists throughout the ages."

"I appreciate it, Grand Elder," said Athelstan. "Maybe after we get done with our current dealings, I'll consider it. I still find it pretty amazing to know that these Pendants of Power are so controversial! I mean, to have all archives of them stripped from Earth and moved here to prevent an apocalypse?"

"It wasn't the Pendants of Power themselves," replied Rosalina. "It

was because of one particular pendant and what that pendant's purpose was that the other remaining pendants were scattered about and all information on them was kept under wraps."

Polari flew in, gesturing to Rosalina. "Grand Elder, I must speak alone with you at once!"

"I will have to tell you more later when I return, Athelstan," said Rosalina. "In the meantime, sit tight and wait for me."

Athelstan nodded and watched Rosalina follow her chief adviser out of the Cosmic Archives. The Elder of the Cosmos and Polari flew out to just outside of the terrace dome, at which point Polari stopped and turned to face his boss.

"What's this all about, Polari?" asked Rosalina. "Your voice seemed very perturbed."

"The stars are showing an important message that *you* must heed!" Polari shouted, gesturing out to the bizarre arrangement of cosmic bodies. The stars appeared to be arranged in a pulsating, swirling vortex. Their movement was hard to notice, but they were indeed mobile. One could argue that the stars were diminishing in number.

"This is quite an interesting turnabout!" Rosalina exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it – this must be important!"

"Allow me to relay this to you, Grand Elder!" replied Polari. "They read, 'Eight heroes must be called upon to make a treacherous journey into the darkest place you can imagine. They will brave hordes of beasts... they will walk through the corrupted forests... they will stare into the eyes of immortal evil underneath a sky of blood, and if they waver even once, they will all die. And you, Rosalina, will have to send them on this quest, knowing full well that they may never return... and knowing that you can do nothing for them but wait, pray, and hope.' Such a message has not been witnessed before! Can you give any meaning to it at all?"

Rosalina's expression darkened, the cryptic nature of the stars unsettling to her. "I have very little certainty regarding the meaning of such a message."

"Could it have something to do with your Kruna?" Polari queried.

"If it does, I don't think I will tell them," Rosalina answered. "I don't know. Not until I learn more, at least. But it appears to me that the stars aren't saying anything else."

"No, they're not," Polari muttered.

"Could it have anything to do with the Master Pendant?" asked Lubba, appearing before the Elder of the Cosmos and her adviser just seconds ago.

"No," Rosalina determined. "The stars would've been much more direct. They would not risk any sort of uncertainty if that was the case." She paused, looking away from the star formation. "This, 'immortal evil,' is intriguing."

The three beings stared on at the prophetic arrangement of stars in wonder, unable to come up with any further speech for quite a while. Rosalina couldn't help but start to develop a mild amount of anxiety over such an ominous message. Polari and Lubba both kept their trust in the Elder of the Cosmos, certain that she would either be able to come up with some sort of interpretation or initiate a proper response.

"I think you may have misread them, Polari," Rosalina finally said. "The 'immortal evil' thing is what's bothering me. That should have already been taken care of ages ago... unless a new one has been on the rise that we do not know about?"

"It's possible," commented Lubba. "However improbable it is, it may just as easily prove to be very much true in time. These stars are a priori, not a posteriori. They know things we don't, things that we have yet to conceive, let alone experience. Perhaps they even transcend the boundaries of space-time! We've seen enough over the centuries to be able to reach that conclusion."

Rosalina nodded. "Yes. So a second immortal evil is not out of the question."

Polari turned to his boss. "I suppose the question is, do you have

the right group of Kruna?"

"What do you mean by that, Polari?" Rosalina replied with a frown.

"I mean exactly what I meant," said Polari. "These elemental wielders of yours still pale in comparison to the powers of the Kruna Genesis, even with the boost they received from Elkon. Remember that it was the Kruna Genesis team that sealed away the Demon God after the Shadow Queen's defeat!"

"Can we not get into a debate over who the best Kruna were?" asked Lubba. "It's nonsensical! There's only one group of them alive right now, so we have to rely on them!"

"Well that's what I was getting at!" Polari exclaimed. "Why not gather a new team of Kruna with the absolute best elemental wielders on Earth? Does the prospect of facing an immortal evil sound like something we should leave in the hands of relatively inexperienced novices?"

"Power is not everything," Rosalina responded. "These current Kruna have something that is intangible. They're not just a bunch of rookies anymore. I said it before; no other elemental wielders would have been successful in liberating the corruption of the elements, and it was not without reason. The stars themselves backed that up. You watch. I will send these Kruna, and they'll succeed just as they have before." She smiled and gave a soft chuckle. "Pride is not in my vocabulary, but I have reason to believe in Daisy and her team."

"But of course," said Polari. "So you will be sending them now?"

"Not yet," Rosalina gently asserted, turning to return to the Cosmic Archives. "Where would I be sending them? Who would they have to confront? Let us wait and see how things play out this time before we make any further decisions. Perhaps the stars will reveal more in the coming days. But for now, I believe Athelstan asked about the Pendants of Power."

Daisy's walk through the Chai Kingdom had been quaint and

undisturbed. Nature's beauty was on full display with its various shades of Autumn leaves. She loved all of the multicolored foliage and extravagant scenery that she had the pleasure of walking through. The warm leaves contrasted perfectly with the cold air. The rays of the mid-afternoon sun shined down on the land. It was a welcome distraction from reality, that is, until reality quickly snapped her back into her body at full force. Daisy stopped and staggered her stance, sensing three large powers closing in on her fast. She leaned forward to get ready to pounce on whoever came across her vision, her eyes darting around the area to catch a glimpse of an animated figure.

Two bodies came flying through the trees and across the air before landing hard on the ground several yards away. They were featureless, humanoid forms with bright yellow eyes and pitch black bodies covered in jackets, trousers, boots, gloves, and sizable pointy hats. One was dressed primarily in shades of blues and the other in shades of brown. Daisy was certain she had seen similar beings before, but was unable to recall where and when exactly. As the two beings threw themselves to their feet, a third figure, more likely than not to be the cause of the crash landing of the former two, dropped out from the tree tops to stand across from them. This third person was a woman equipped with a crossbow that had a bladed attachment. She had on a knee-length, light blue skirt with white leggings and silver shoes that paired with her white, long-sleeve button blouse. The ice symbol was prominent on either side of her skirt and the upper right portion of her top. Her blonde hair had long, side-swept bangs and collected into a short ponytail in the back, making her appear really young. She was relatively short, but the power that Daisy sensed in her was not something to be taken lightly. Even so, this newcomer looked dorky, nerdy, and awkward. *Was she actually fighting against these two?* Daisy wondered. *Her energy's on par with Grekka's! No, higher! I'm not going to dismiss it as absurd, but really?!*

The brown-clothed figure turned his head to look at Daisy, then immediately sent out a wave of energy at the Kruna of Earth. She contorted the earth around her so that she was able to drop into a small pit and avoid the attack.

"Why are you attacking her?" the wider blue-clothed figure asked.

"I thought I saw King Sarasa for a brief moment," the thicker, stockier brown-clothed figure replied. "It was reflex, but she's obviously not the king." When they spoke, the two featureless bodies' pitch black forms concealed any sort of facial movement. Their voices were fairly average in nature. They did not seem like threatening people at all, and actually looked laughably cartoonish compared to the otherworldly enemies that Daisy had recently fought.

"You know my dad?" Daisy asked. The Kruna of Earth's question caught the attention of the white-clothed girl, who narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"You're his daughter?" the blue-clothed figure exclaimed, turning to his counterpart. "Cephas, Marissa is watching us through Remote Viewing, correct?"

"Yes," the brown-clothed figure responded. "Lord Arkana is seeing and hearing everything that is occurring here."

"Poor choice of words, Sarasa," the white-clothed girl muttered to herself. "Way to make yourself a target."

"We must kill the Sarasa-born human," determined the blue-clothed figure.

"I agree, Kenn," said Cephas, raising an arm to target his palm at the Kruna of Earth.

"Hey!" the white-clothed girl called out, waving her crossbow. "What am I? Chopped liver and onions?"

"More like gizzards," Kenn mumbled. "Nobody likes gizzards; especially not when they're spicy."

"We've been dealing with you for long enough," stated Cephas. "You can wait, whatever your name is."

"It's Neva!" the white-clothed girl shouted. "Pronounced 'Knee-vuh!' And don't you forget it! You shouldn't, because I've been kicking

your asses this whole time!"

"How about, 'Neva' speak again!" Kenn scowled. "Because every time you vocalize, my eardrums are assaulted by your squeaky, snarky, insubordinate sounds that you call language." Neva huffed and puffed in response, aiming with her Frost Crossbow and Frost Bayonet attachment.

"And the immoderate child decides to try this again," Cephas groaned, turning his arm to Neva.

"So what's the deal with you, Sarasa?" asked Neva, maintaining the aim of her weapon at Kenn and Cephas but turning her gaze to the Kruna of Earth. "That is, if you really are one. If you are, then I'm gonna have to kill you. Any Sarasa is not good news around here."

"No, we will register the kill for the both of you," Kenn corrected. "You for annoying us, and you for being related to King Sarasa."

"No!" Neva yelled. "That's my kill!"

"What? Why kill anyone?" Daisy asked.

"ZIP IT, SARASA!" Kenn, Cephas, and Neva all shouted, all aiming their energies at the earth wielder.

"Hey! Put those arms down!" Neva commanded, shifting her Frost Crossbow back at the two featureless beings. "I said she's mine!"

Kenn turned to Neva and formed a sphere of mystic energy. "Who are you to dictate us? You just barely put on your adult diapers and now you think you're head honcho?"

"DIAPERS?!" Neva screamed. "Take that back! And while you're at it, take off your stupid costumes; Halloween was three weeks ago!"

"You better be grateful we don't feed you to the hellhounds!" Cephas snapped.

"Please, I can take down all eight of you Sweeps!" proclaimed Neva, focusing her elemental energy into her crossbow. Four arrows of pure ice materialized onto her elemental tool.

"Sweeps?" Daisy repeated in question.

"Marissa's band of Black Mages," Neva answered. "Two of which are standing over there being total jackasses!"

"Who's Marissa?" Daisy asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Don't worry about it, Sarasa," responded Kenn. "You'll be dead in a matter of moments."

"BY ME!" Neva called out.

"Shut it, runt!" Cephas snapped.

"Cephas!" Kenn exclaimed. "That was entirely indecent!"

"I said 'runt,' Kenn!" grunted Cephas. "Because she's half our size! Get your head out of your ass!"

"No, keep it in there so I can get an easy shot!" Neva yelled, aiming her crossbow.

"I don't think so, little human!" said Cephas, his outstretched arm starting to sparkle and glow as he turned to the white-clothed girl.

"Call off whatever spell you're preparing!" Neva demanded.

"How about you drop that crossbow of yours?" Kenn suggested.

"Hey, I asked first!" Neva groused, her face turning red.

"Can I add a suggestion?" Daisy asked.

"NO!" All three beings yelled back at her.

"Just sit there and smile for your death," said Cephas. "This little brat is begging for eradication."

"Don't break your tongue with big words, you poor excuse for circus clowns!" Neva spat out.

"I'm sorry you didn't take the time to establish a decent vocabulary," remarked Kenn. "Otherwise, you would've been able to understand

that there are far more complex words that can be utilized to describe you and your wretched attitude."

Neva giggled, shifting her gaze up to the sky. "Scathing."

"Okay, this has gone on long enough," Daisy muttered. "One; I am not in any way supporting anything my father does."

The Kruna of Earth's last statement caught Neva's interest, the ice wielder skeptical of Daisy's words. Nonetheless, she didn't interrupt, and neither did Kenn or Cephas.

"Two; we should not have to resolve things by trying to decide who kills who!" Daisy continued. "Third, I think-"

Before Daisy could finish her sentence, Neva fired her crossbow at Kenn and Cephas both. Ice arrows penetrated through one of Kenn's knees and both of Cephas' ankles, effectively crippling the two Sweeps. Daisy was shocked by the precision and lack of inhibition showcased by the ice wielder.

"What the hell – cheapshot!" Kenn cried out, clutching his knee.

Cephas collapsed to the ground in visible agony. "I can't walk!"

"Are you or are you not working with King Sarasa?" Neva asked Daisy, aiming her Frost Crossbow at the Kruna of Earth.

"I'm not in any way working with my father!" Daisy assured. "And I'm not just saying that so you won't blow out my legs! In fact, that's the sole reason I came to Sarasaland in the first place – to dethrone him and bring him down!"

"Interesting," Neva mumbled. "If that's the case, then I suggest you not travel alone out here, lest you run into any of Marissa's other Sweeps."

"I appreciate your concern, but I don't think I'm going to need such advice," Daisy replied, peering at the two downed Black Mages. "Even though it was effective, I don't exactly condone the way you used your elemental tool. These guys seem formidable, but I don't think they're much of a problem. I've come across beings of roughly

equal amounts of power in my travels. They were tough fighters, but defeating them didn't require any sort of debilitating injuries."

"You poor fool," said Neva, shaking her head. "You know not what you're dealing with here. What the hell is wrong with you; showing mercy for your adversaries?"

"It's the honorable thing to do," Daisy replied. "In combat, we should all show respect for our opponents and give them a fair chance."

Neva frowned, showing scorn and disgust. "What do you think this is, some sort of a game?"

"Marissa has been watching this whole event... through the use of her Malocchio," Kenn sputtered out through the pain. "You have all already lost... you've lost, the King has lost, and all of Sarasaland has lost." In spite of their injuries, Kenn and Cephas began laughing.

Wasting no time, Neva leapt up into the air and thrust the Frost Bayonet of her crossbow into the neck of Kenn, twisting her elemental tool upon contact. She repeated the action on Cephas, then leapt back and charged a dense mass of magnetized frost through the tip of her blade, smothering the two Sweeps and ravaging the open gashes in their necks. By the end of her maneuver, the two featureless bodies were now lifeless. Once more, Daisy was astounded by Neva's lack of apprehension and appalled by the ice wielder's willingness to kill them without question.

"What was that all about?" Daisy asked. "Was that really necessary?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, it was!" Neva scowled. "What the hell is your problem?"

"I was going to ask you the same question," Daisy responded.

Neva spit at the two dead Sweeps. "Oh please! Enough with your nonsense! You should be grateful – had you not spoken your peace, I would have dealt you the same treatment! You think these people would've showed you the same courtesy you wanted to show them? You think they would've gave you the same 'honor and respect' that

you would've gave?"

Daisy didn't give any response, but her expression was intense.

"And here you are, 'Miss Angel of Love and Peace,' calling for such trifles to be used with people who don't deserve any!" Neva continued. "They would have decapitated you the moment you turned your back on them!"

"I could've handled them both, and without killing either of them!" the Kruna of Earth asserted. "If they proved to be too much to handle, then I could've just transformed into my Nova state and taken care of them!"

"So what?" Neva snarled. "Nova Form means nothing! My best friend was able to go into Nova Form and now he's dead! Your adversaries don't have to be stronger to beat you! They could take your friends and family hostage, or they could take you down with a sneak attack before you even get a chance to react! That goes for everyone, not just these Sweeps!"

Without any conscious willing, Daisy thought about how Kokoro killed Terran with a surprise blow to his neck. And yet, the Kruna of Earth had let Kokoro go after dominating the Soul Stealer in the second round of an otherwise brutal battle for the both of them. At this point, Kokoro could be anywhere. She vaguely remembered snapping Kokoro's right arm by his elbow in a fury that she still wasn't sure she could attribute to what was her initial Nova Transformation.

The tension in Neva's face made a stark increase. "These people are ruthless savages. They're barbarians, and they'll do whatever it takes to get what they want. Whenever you get the rare chance to bring them down, you gotta make sure they *stay* down, otherwise you're accomplishing nothing!"

"I'm sorry if I don't want to go around killing people," Daisy replied. "I'm not a pacifist – far from it in fact – but I'm not going to change the fact that killing is something that I just... can't bring myself to do."

"Get it through your thick skull that some people are not deserving of

the life they've been granted," Neva scowled. "These people won't hold any restraint; they'll strip you of your life without any second thought because you're nothing but an obstruction to them, we all are. You're going to get chewed up and spit out with that kind of attitude!"

"We'll see about that," Daisy sternly responded. "I don't think having respect and compassion for your opponents is a bad thing."

"You go ahead and take that into battle against Marissa and see what happens," Neva groused. "You'll be lucky if you last long enough to even recognize the pain of death."

"Who is this 'Marissa' you've been talking about?" asked Daisy.

Neva did not hesitate when she replied, "Your end."

An uncomfortable silence followed for a few moments. Both elemental wielders were deathly serious. Daisy's eyes shifted back to Kenn and Cephas' corpses, a deep, sickening feeling developing within her.

"I thought you said you were a 'Sarasa' child," stated Neva. "Your father would've wasted no time in wiping the both of them off of the face of the Earth!"

Daisy grimaced. "I am *nothing* like my father."

"Well that's become more evident than ever," Neva remarked. "Marissa would show you no mercy. She would ask for it right to your face long before she ever gave you any. You're in over your head if you think you can stand toe-to-toe with her, especially considering her Malocchio."

"I have absolute belief and confidence in my ability to beat her, whoever she is," Daisy asserted. "But I have to go and rip my dad out of his hubris before he starts altering more maps."

Neva snickered, clearly full of bitterness. "I've got to see this." She retracted the Frost Bayonet of her Frost Crossbow and placed the tool across her back. "Sarasaland Castle Town is where you want to go. I'll come along and watch you fail, but only if you hurry up. I

know you cave-dwelling earth-diggers need to take your time with things, especially with the sun bearing down on your light sensitive eyes."

"Please, I'm certain that with a pulled hamstring I can outrun you," Daisy assured, ignoring Neva's blatant and deliberate use of stereotypes.

"An earth wielder who's fast?" Neva asked. "That doesn't happen. I'll give earth wielders toughness, but speed? Strength? No, I don't think so."

As if on cue, Daisy dashed forward a hundred yards and struck the ground with her fist, causing a shockwave to ripple a short radius around her and break the affected ground into chunks. She zipped back to Neva, less than ten seconds having elapsed from the time she initially started.

Neva frowned. "Well, you're an abomination."

With a gasp, Daisy's mouth dropped flat open. *Her attitude is atrocious!* she screamed in her mind.

"I've seen better anyways," Neva remarked with a flick of her wrist.

"I never said I was the best!" Daisy snapped.

"And that's where your problem is," Neva replied with a haughty smile. "You have to think you're the best, because only the best survive in Sarasaland."

"What do you mean by that?" the Kruna of Earth asked.

The ice wielder cocked her head to one side before she turned and started trotting down the path in the direction of Sarasaland Castle Town. "You're really not from around here, are you?"

Perplexed, Daisy looked at Neva and replied, "Actually, I am."

Chapter III

Bad News :

"I appreciate you guys all coming with me," said Marut. Bowser, Warra, Ramona, and Andrew all stood with the Kruna of Air in his home, Nimbus Land, a floating kingdom sitting atop a massive, everlasting cloud. Their trip was brief thanks to Ramona and Andrew's ability to combine their elemental powers to create a portal that took them there.

"Not a problem at all," Andrew assured. "Especially considering the circumstances. But if you don't mind me asking; what exactly is this place?"

"Yeah, I was wondering that too!" said Ramona.

"I'm pretty sure we're all wondering that," added Bowser. "All I see are clouds, buildings textured like clouds, and people made of clouds. I think Michelin is gonna sue somebody."

"Well, this is Nimbus Land," Marut explained. "A nation in the sky, a kingdom in the heavens, an airborne city, and whatever other colloquialism you wanna throw in there!"

"And the cloud-people?" Bowser questioned.

"They're the Nimbi!" the green-clothed fighter replied. "Nimbus Land was originally inhabited exclusively by the Nimbi, but in the past half-century or so, humans migrated here. It's really peaceful up here. The incidence of crime is almost non-existent here too!"

"I can understand that," said Andrew. "It wouldn't make much sense to go rob a bank on top of a cloud several thousands of feet in the air."

Marut started to gesture around in various directions as he led the Kruna through the kingdom. "That's the palace of King Nimbus, then there's Nimbus Inn over there, and then the royal hot springs are

somewhere behind us..."

"Marut," Warra murmured. "Are you okay? Are you sure you're doing alright?"

Marut frowned. "What do you mean man? I'm fine... I'm good." The Kruna followed as Marut kept walking with an otherwise lively gait, though Warra could not help but think that air wielder's demeanor was not genuine.

You didn't seem so fine when that messenger came to the palace, the Kruna of Water thought.

"You need to return to Nimbus Land right away, Marut," the cloud-person urged. It was moments after he appeared before the Kruna in the courtyard of Bowser's Palace. His appearance interrupted the talks of their next course of action. They had all been out in the courtyard for less than a half hour before the cloud-person showed up.

"What do you mean?" asked Marut.

"Your uncle, Satoru, requested your presence," answered the Nimbus. "Please, come to Nimbus Land as soon as you can... while you can."

In an instant, Marut's face grew dark as he let out a sickly gasp.

"I would tell you, but... I think you need to see for yourself," the Nimbus finished.

"Marut, is your uncle... okay?" asked Ramona.

"I don't now," Marut stuttered. "He wasn't doing so well when I joined you guys. He was in the hospital for a little while with unexplained, intermittent angina. No one was able to tell what was going on. They ran tests and everything, so when they couldn't identify the cause, they waited until the pains subsided and then discharged him. Shortly afterwards, I left, so I don't know what followed or what's happened since then..."

"It was in your absence that we identified a VSD," said the Nimbus.

Marut expressed confusion. "A what?"

"Ventricular septal defect," stated Andrew.

"How did you know that, shadow wielder?" asked Bowser.

"I just know," the Kruna of Shadow responded, saying nothing more on the matter.

"There's no time to explain further; please, come quickly to Nimbus East Hospital," the Nimbus urged once more before leaping into the air and soaring into the distance.

"He said he was going to be fine," Marut barely managed to sputter out. "He said don't worry about him."

"Ramona and I can make the portal for you to get to Nimbus Land," said Andrew. "I'm coming with you, Marut."

"We'll all go," Bowser determined. "I'm wondering if we should wait for Athelstan to return from the Comet Observatory."

"We can't wait," said Andrew, already focusing his shadow energies. "We need to go now. That's all there is to it."

Ramona moved to stand with Andrew as she focused her light energy. "Don't worry Marut, we'll waste no time in getting us all there."

Warra nodded, but his gaze was affixed to Marut's uncharacteristically despondent look. Bowser took note of it as well. The Kruna of Air appeared dejected, lost, and disconnected from the world as Ramona and Andrew focused their abilities to create the necessary portal.

Overcompensation, Warra affirmed in his mind as the Kruna continued following Marut.

"Nimbi don't like to come to the surface too often," Marut mumbled. "Which means that this is serious..." He paused, but his tone picked back up in a matter of seconds. "It's fine though! This'll all turn out okay! This could very easily be something miraculous!"

"How old is he, Marut?" the Kruna of Water asked.

The air wielder turned his head. "What..."

"Your uncle... How old is he?" Warra asked again.

"He was the younger brother of my mom before she passed," murmured Marut. "He's not even thirty-five."

Nimbus East Hospital came into view, at which point Marut turned his walk into a jog and then into a run. The other Kruna upped their pace to try to keep up with the fastest member of their team. Marut burst through the doors to the hospital and demanded the room number for his uncle, sprinting for the stairs once the attendant provided it for him. Lagging behind, the rest of the team dashed into the hospital moments after Marut went up to the higher floors. The attendant gave the Kruna the room number for them to follow their green-clothed teammate.

Marut bolted into his uncle's room in time to see a human doctor, two Nimbus nurses, and a motionless Uncle Satoru. The doctor turned around when she heard Marut panting as he entered the room.

"Uncle!" Marut called out.

"Hello, I'm Doctor Joy," said the doctor. "You must be Marut, correct?"

"Yes," answered the Kruna of Air. "What's going on with my uncle?!"

Doctor Joy's tone was deeply somber as she spoke. "I'm sorry... but, you've arrived too late."

"What do you mean I'm too late?!" Marut screamed.

Doctor Joy didn't say anything, instead gesturing to Uncle Satoru.

His eyes were closed, several tubes attached to his still body. Marut's mouth flared open as if he was trying to stay something, but nothing came out. He seemed resigned to the fact that his uncle, the person who acted in place of his parents, was now with them. Marut didn't know how to react; he did not cry, he did not wail, he did not rant or rave, he did not even move. All he did was show a wide-eyed, unfocused, vacant stare. The other Kruna rushed into the room, instantly becoming aware of what had happened after sensing the atmosphere of the room.

"He wanted to give you this," said Doctor Joy, reaching for a box. "He was saving it for when you returned, but, well..." She didn't say anything more, instead giving Marut the box with a bow reading "Happy Birthday" stuck on top.

It was only then that Marut realized something that he somehow managed to ignore and forget about. "Today's my birthday..."

Nobody said anything for a while – nobody was sure what to say. Distressed and distraught, Marut didn't open the box.

"How old... are you supposed to be today?" asked Doctor Joy, careful with her tone.

"... Nineteen," was Marut's muted response.

"Marut, your uncle gave you a gift," said Ramona, referring to the fact that the air wielder had yet to open his box. "A gift that I'm sure he would've wanted you to open."

"I have to insist that you open it," Doctor Joy added. "He wanted me to ensure that you would."

Bowser put a hand on Marut's shoulder. "Whatever it is within that box, treasure it for life." The Koopa King put all the sincerity and levity he could into his statements. "A family member is one of the closest people you have, but you never know when or how they're going to go when it's time for them to go. The earthly possessions they leave for you are definitely not insignificant gestures."

Marut nodded, but his expression remained mostly unchanged. He

undid the bow to open the box, his teammates noticing him perk up when he looked inside. "Gust Boomerangs," he whispered. "I always wanted a boomerang, and he gave me two..." He took out the two boomerangs that were silver with green trim, revealing a letter with the word "Nephew" that rested underneath them. Holding the boomerangs in one hand, he put the box down and picked up the letter.

"What does it say, Marut?" asked Ramona. "Hand it to me and I'll read it off to you."

Marut unfolded the letter and gave it to Ramona. With a soothing voice, she began to read aloud from what was all but certain to be from the Kruna of Air's uncle. "I hope this finds you well, dear boy. You may not be able to fly with your body, but you'll always be able to fly with your spirit. The only thing that has changed is that now, I won't be around to witness it anymore. Don't let that discourage you in the least. We both knew that this was imminent. It's just that I had to go sooner rather than later. My heart has failed, but yours will live on in more ways than one. You've made me proud, and you would've made your mother and father proud as well. They would've wanted to see the kind of man that you have become, and that I have had the pleasure of being able to see and bring to be. So take flight, Marut, and live on, for wherever your journey takes you, it must now continue without me."

On the porch of their house in Nimbus Land, Marut sat, looking out into the sunset sky. Uncle Satoru stood nearby, a gruff, stocky man, jolly in his mannerisms and tone. The future Kruna of Air was doing all he could to justify his departure for the elemental shrines, the adventure the rest of the elemental wielders he had yet to meet had to embark on and could not deny.

"I have to go, Uncle," Marut asserted. "This is my chance to help out the world! I always wanted to go on an adventure. And now, I can! It sounds so exciting, dangerous, thrilling, heart-stopping, polarizing-"

"You also always wanted to fly," said Satoru. "Remember that time when you wanted to jump off Nimbus Land because you were so

sure that you would be able to just jet through the air? If I hadn't of held you back, you would've splattered on the ground!"

"That's not the same thing though, Uncle!"

"It isn't? Are you sure?"

Marut nodded. "This is something big, I can feel it. It's calling to me, beckoning to me. I was really young when I thought I could fly. I didn't know what it meant when something was deemed out of reach, nor did I know what it meant to not be capable of something. But now, I can differentiate. This adventure, it's well within reach, and I know I am capable of playing the role I must play in it; my role."

"And how do you know, Nephew? How do you know that it was actually a divine being that visited you in the night and instructed you in this manner?"

Marut's gaze remained fixated on the dimming horizon. "I know, because it's something I don't need to think about. It's something I never had to question."

"I see," Satoru murmured. "Or is it because you just don't want to think about college? You know, aviation would suit you very well. You taking on this mission would be delaying your career development."

Marut momentarily paused, almost irritated by his uncle's comment. "I have a feeling that you're not taking me seriously."

"You make it hard for anyone to take you seriously, Marut," Satoru replied, placing his hands on his hips. "I just want to make sure you're on the right path is all."

"I'm not changing my mind," was Marut's indirect response. "I'm going. And I will be back."

Satoru's tone shifted to one of concern. "And if you don't make it back? There's a very real possibility that you could get killed on this mission, you know. There's a lot going on in the world down below. There are obstacles of all shapes and sizes, strengths and number,

that you may potentially run into."

"I'm well aware, but... I'm not worried. My dreams are not lying to me. No... what am I saying? They can't be dreams. They're more than dreams. They're projections, they've got to be. It's the corruption of the elements that has projected onto me, or something like that. It's hard to explain. Like I said, I'm not questioning it. I can't. It's too real to question." The air wielder smiled. "And besides, I haven't been down to the surface world too often at all! There's so much I haven't seen! I'll be exploring through places I've never even been through before, let alone thought of!"

Satoru sighed. "Just because your parents are dead doesn't give you any justification to throw your life away."

"It's got nothing to do with that," replied Marut. "It's the exact opposite. I've got to live for them. Others have to live for those who died. Countless others will die if I don't accept this quest. My parents would've wanted me to take on this task, I'm sure of it."

Satoru closed his eyes and chuckled. "You know what, Marut? You never cease to amaze me. You've got something that I just can't describe. I wish everyone had your intangibles. It goes well beyond the energy of youth. There's something about you that goes beyond your senses; something, instinctual, perhaps. You know, you're almost nineteen, and now you're going to take on such a harrowing, daunting task; one that you seem really enthusiastic about. Where the time has gone..."

"I'll be fine, Uncle," Marut reassured with a laugh. "I guarantee it. I'll be back, and you'll see me again."

The Kruna of Air clipped the Gust Boomerangs to his belt. They fit perfectly and melded together with the green, silver, and black color scheme of his clothing, almost as if he was meant to have them. They seemed to be a little less than two feet in total length each.

"His heart gave out so quickly," informed Doctor Joy. "It seemed to be very strained, and that's not even counting his VSD. None of us

could have foresaw the speed at which he passed. None of us but Satoru himself."

Silence. That's all Marut displayed. His emotionless face uttered one singular phrase before returning to muteness. "I didn't even get a chance... to say goodbye..."

The silence extended from Marut to become universal. Sound was absent from the entire room as Marut brooded over the passing of his Uncle Satoru. Now, there was no one in his family, no one immediate at least. His father passed before his birth, his mother died conceiving him, and now his mother's brother was no longer alive either. He never knew anything about his grandparents other than that they were dead before his parents met. *My whole family's full of death,* he thought. *How can I possibly hope to distract myself from that?*

Bowser couldn't help to think back to just a week ago when Princess Peach visited his palace to give him the bag containing the crowns of his mother and father placed on top of his mother's cape along with a letter that rested in the former Koopa King's crown. Now Marut was experiencing the same thing, but the circumstances between Bowser and Marut in this scenario were entirely different. Even so, the Kruna of Fire had empathy for his green-clothed air teammate. So much had changed within Bowser now that he was no longer hellbent on getting revenge on the Mushroom Kingdom.

"There's a small chance that the VSD is hereditary," said Doctor Joy. "Would you like us to perform a background check on your medical history? Your grandparents could have passed it on to both your mother and your uncle, and if that's the case, there's a risk – albeit small – that you may have a very similar issue that has been asymptomatic up to this point."

It didn't take very long at all for Marut to respond by saying, "No." His answer was accompanied by an uncharacteristically grizzly tone and a shift in composure towards indignation. For a moment, his face was reminiscent of Grekka's when the deceased Kruna of Ice succumbed to his inner rage and hatred and engaged in battle with Daisy. A few seconds later, Marut turned towards the door to walk out the room.

"Marut, hold on-" Ramona started to say before Andrew grabbed her by the shoulder. When she turned to face her shadow teammate, he shook his head. "Andrew?"

"I think he needs a moment," Andrew replied.

Warra calmly made his way to the door. "He'll be fine. I'll go talk to him."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" asked Bowser. "I don't think we've ever seen him look like that."

The Kruna of Water turned around for a brief moment when he walked out the door. "How often is anyone ever sure of anything?"

"... Not very often at all," Bowser murmured.

"I will talk to him, but whether he wants to listen is his decision," Warra responded.

"I think I'm the one who should talk to him instead," Bowser urged.

"I'll talk to him now; you can talk to him later," Warra said before proceeding to go down the hallway to find Marut.

Rosalina led Athelstan deep within the Cosmic Archives to a drawer bolted shut between a row of shelves. She placed her hand on the electronic pad, causing a reaction to occur that released the locks from the drawer to allow access inside. Filing through the many papers and memory cards within, she pulled out one thick book.

"Alkemei," the Cosmic Queen said. "Cosmic Dialect for 'Pendant of Power,' and the proper term for the pendants as a whole. All information on the Alkemei is within this book. Before I hand this over to you, I must first tell you of the reason the existence of the Pendants of Power have been kept in secrecy."

Athelstan nodded. "I see. Please."

Rosalina closed her eyes as she began her short tale, going deep

within her mind's memory. "Of course, the terms 'Alkemei,' and 'Pendants of Power,' will be used interchangeably. A thousand years ago, after the defeat of the Shadow Queen, her chief archfiend and Demon God, Osiris, carried on her legacy and launched a campaign of vengeance and blood on the Earth. He brought fear, destruction, and doom to the planet to gain total control over the world in a matter of days. He did not have to expend much effort, since humanity had severely weakened itself with ages and ages of war on its permanent record. This was long before you were even conceived, Athelstan."

"Woah," the Kruna of Stone murmured.

"At the time of his rule, eight elemental heroes rose up from the ashes of the Armageddon to challenge the Demon God and succeeded," Rosalina continued, reopening her eyes. "Osiris was sealed away inside the Master Pendant by the eight beings that made up the first team of Kruna. At that time, all the Alkemei, including the Master Pendant, were scattered throughout the lands in remote places and out of public eye. All records of the Pendants of Power were relocated to the Comet Observatory to prevent people from learning and subsequently seeking out these gems... because if the existence of the Alkemei were known, then it would have only been a matter of time before people would seek out the Master Pendant. With the Master Pendant lost and ignorance of the Alkemei established, the world repaired and recovered... mostly. People were angered and irritated with one another, often criticizing various other nations for allowing Osiris to take control. Wars would become a more prevalent part of this modern era as people accused other political systems and ways of life that were different from their own as problematic, inferior, and the root of all evils. The elements were weaponized during this period and became an integral part of war strategy. To this day, Osiris' mark remains scorched on the planet's surface. He remains sealed in the Master Pendant, but of course, we did not account for Elkon and the saga that ensued with him. Let's hope that that particular gem has been lost forever."

"Last we ever saw of it was in the Twelfth Dimension," said Athelstan. "But now I'm wondering; how exactly did those Kruna manage to seal away Osiris in the first place?"

"Ah, yes," Rosalina began. "Had Grekka still been alive, the eight of you could have combined your elemental powers to not only create an Elemental Wave but to also create an Elemental Seal to imprison Elkon in an indestructible casing and freeze him in time. It is in this manner that the first team of Kruna, the Kruna Genesis, were able to seal away the Demon God. Because Osiris was in possession of the Master Pendant at the time, a bizarre reaction occurred in which the seal actually stripped his essence from his body and locked it away within that particular Alkemei itself. Some of the effects of the Elemental Seal were negated, as could be determined just by the knowledge that the pendant is not frozen but actually sentient, but Osiris is still bound to it and can not leave the gem. The only way for Osiris to be freed is if all eight elemental powers were used on the Elemental Seal, or in this case, the Master Pendant. Such action would undo the initial Elemental Seal, therein freeing the Demon God." Her tone grew gravely brooding. "It is likely that if Osiris were freed, he himself would seek to free the Shadow Queen."

"Then I guess it was a good thing that Grekka wasn't with us after all," stated Athelstan. "Had he been there, Osiris would've been freed because that pendant had taken control of Elkon's corpse to do battle with us. We had all seven of our elemental powers combined into the Elemental Wave in order to win that fight."

Rosalina perked up in subtle surprise since the Kruna had yet to tell her the dealings of what went down at Elkon's Final Fortress. "Osiris is more powerful than we thought if he was truly able to transcend his powers beyond the seal in that manner. It's a very good blessing that the Master Pendant is in the Twelfth Dimension and away from civilization." She handed the Book of Alkemei over to Athelstan. "These Pendants of Power offer great use. However, the more powerful a pendant is, the easier it is for the user to lose control of it, much like an elemental tool, or like using a substantial amount of elemental energy at once for that matter. Exercise caution with these pendants as you would with your other equipment. This is not to discourage the use of these pendants, however. You may find at some point in the future that they will prove to be very useful, at which time you'll have to find some of them to aid you in your endeavors. As you flip through this book, you'll find that it has the last known location of most of the Alkemei on Earth. Unless there's

a drastic change on the planet, you can expect a ninety percent accuracy rate on their location and potential holders, keepers, or even guardians at the very least."

"Excellent!" Athletstan cheered. "Thank you so much for this, Grand Elder! I'll-"

Rosalina put up a hand in Athelstan's face, her expression deathly serious. "You have permission to read through this book, so you may do so. You will not take this book out of these archives. You will not bring this information to any of the archives on Earth. Any notes you take from this book are solely yours and are to be guarded with your very life. They are not to be shared with anyone, not even your fellow Kruna. Not yet, and hopefully never. However, if the world comes to a point where you and your team must make use of the Alkemei, then and only then can you reveal your information. Until then, you now hold the burden of secret knowledge. Is that understood, Athelstan?"

"Yes," answered the Kruna of Stone. "I know all too well the importance of secrecy. I've had to live with the burden of secret knowledge for most of my life, before I relocated to Kallantown, that is."

The Elder of the Cosmos nodded. "Well understood, but I am not mincing my words here. You are bound by the Comet Observatory, the Cosmic Committee, and the Cosmic Archives to uphold the confidentiality of this information and, exceptions aside, are prohibited to disclose any of these records to those outside of our current location."

Chapter IV

Homecoming :

"I am part of a recently formed resistance against the Central Castle," said Neva. Her and Daisy exited Chai Kingdom boundaries and were nearing Sarasaland Castle Town, the central area of Sarasaland. "And when I say 'Central Castle,' I mean the entire political governing body of Sarasaland, not just the literal Central Castle, in case you were too stupid to figure that out."

"Resistance?!" asked Daisy, ignoring the inaccurate insult. "What's the resistance for? Is it really that bad here?"

The late afternoon sun worked on Neva's hair to shadow most of her face. "You'll see when we walk into town, or, hopefully you will. Or they'll see you. Whichever one. So what have you been doing in your time away from Sarasaland?"

"Well, basically a lot of sports!" answered Daisy. "I'm actually training for the Olympics! Well, I was before I had to partake in a very important mission that directly preceded my coming here."

"Olympics, huh?"

"Yeah! I wanna compete in track and field, weightlifting, archery, soccer, and if they allow it in this year, baseball! If I can get at least eight gold medals, I'd have to say that I did pretty good!"

"Okay sure, cave-dweller," Neva muttered. "If you wanna believe that fantasy, go ahead."

You know what, I can just as easily respond to you by calling you 'snow blower' or something similar just for your sour attitude, Daisy groused in her thoughts. *But I'm not. I'm being the bigger man here!... Or bigger woman here – whatever! I'm all for sass, but damn, you're just being mean!*

"It is said that you earth wielders primarily wear black clothing to

hide the filth that results from the use of your messy element," Neva commented as she examined her nails.

"Woah – that is insulting!" Daisy gasped.

The ice wielder smirked. "Well it is also said that you only wear black because your vision is so conditioned for underground environments that any bright piece of clothing burns your eyes."

" *That* is insulting!" Daisy shouted. "You know, silver is a secondary color for earth wielders and orange is considered a tertiary color for earth wielders too!"

"Because orange blends in with your disgusting dirt. Would you expect anything else from a bunch of miners, engineers, and construction workers? You earth wielders do nothing but live in grime! By the way, does that mean your eyes are searing when you stare in the mirror at your hair?"

"How about I dirty your precious whites you damn star-gazing freezer-dork!" Daisy snapped. She didn't mean to retaliate. The words just materialized in her red-hot head and flew out of her mouth.

"That's your response, Ms. Flower-Picker Princess?" Neva scowled. "That's pretty sad. You now, I can still kill you on the spot right now without hesitation if you'd like! You are born from King Sarasa after all – your genes would verify that. Maybe I should just take you hostage and hold you for ransom so that I can force him to step down from the throne."

"Hate to break it to you, but he'd choose power and wealth over me."

"Well, you're more worthless than I thought."

Daisy cocked one of her eyebrows up. *Okay, either she woke up on the wrong side of the bed today, or I might have to deal with this for however long she's with me.* She sighed, maintaining her pace. "Look, I'm sorry for my reaction, but I did not provoke anything. Do you mind me asking why you're so bitter?"

"Why should I have any reason to not be bitter?" Neva questioned.

"You think my attitude's bad? Wait until you walk into Castle Town. If they recognize you, you're going to wish they didn't."

Before Daisy could respond to Neva's cryptic statement, a shiny, gunmetal gray figure caught her eyes fifty yards downfield. Metal Mario was banging its head on a nearby tree to shake down fruit. It succeeded in knocking down a handful of bananas, but then a coconut fell from high up and knocked it on its head. Once the metal body noticed that Daisy was near, it stopped and prepared itself for battle with the Kruna of Earth.

"You gotta be kidding me," Daisy grumbled. "Ramona and Andrew, of all the places you could've sent this metal thing..." Grekka's icicles were now gone, but the dents and holes from the deceased Kruna of Ice's attacks were still there.

"Aw, looks like it remembers you," Neva cooed, obviously sarcastic. "What did you do to it? Did you get mud and oil confused?"

"I didn't do anything to it!" Daisy shouted. Metal Mario charged forward, slow as ever but determined in its stride.

Neva smirked once more. "Are you actually going to fight it, Sarasa, or are you going to stand by and watch it clobber you into oblivion?"

"How do I fight a being made entirely of metal?!" Daisy yelled.

"You shouldn't've messed with it then," Neva remarked.

"I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO IT!" the Kruna of Earth growled. "We ran into it and it kept following us!"

Metal Mario closed in and attempted to throw a punch at Daisy, but she managed to catch its fist in the palm of her hand. Daisy then put up her foot to block a kick that the metal figure launched. Pulling on the clenched fist, the Kruna of Earth latched onto Metal Mario and made a double front flip suplex to drive the metal figure into the ground. Before Daisy got a chance to let go, Metal Mario switched the grip around and grabbed hold of her to fling her airborne. With a couple somersaults, she canceled out the momentum of her trajectory to begin a soft descent back down to the ground.

"Is that the best you can do?" Neva spat out.

"Shut the hell up already, will ya?" Daisy snapped as Metal Mario propped itself up on its feet.

"Where's all that strength and speed of yours now, cave-dweller?" Neva taunted. "Oh look at me! I'm gonna throw people instead of fight them!"

Daisy caught another one of Metal Mario's punches. "Not helping, Neva!"

"I'm supposed to be helping?" the ice wielder condescendingly asked. "I guess you obviously need it."

Metal Mario threw a kick into Daisy's waist, sending the Kruna of Earth skidding along the ground to the side of the path. The cumulative stress that remained as a result of her lack of recovery from her previous adventure had left her slow to get up.

"Stop wasting time, dirt-eater!" Neva cried out with impatience.

"You know what, why don't you try dealing with this thing?" Daisy snarled back as Metal Mario made its way towards her.

In under three seconds, four ice arrows flew into Metal Mario's head and neck. Four more followed in the same area, then another four into its torso, and then yet another four at its arm, but Neva was not done. Two more sets of four tore into Metal Mario's leg and hips. Neva rushed forward and jumped at Metal Mario with a kick, knocking down the metal figure off of its feet. Metal Mario was motionless, not showing any signs of animation. It looked nothing like a humanoid mass of metal after Neva's attacks, instead resembling something more like the remains of a car crash.

"You show far too much restraint, Sarasa," Neva muttered, her distaste evident. "You're not holding true to your name."

"Excuse me, but I do believe that I am," Daisy responded. "I'm the only one to determine what my name stands for, not my father."

"Be ready to prove it when we walk into town then, soil-drinker,"

Neva coldly remarked, pointing into the distance. A city was faintly visible, downhill from where they currently were. The ice wielder put her Frost Crossbow in its place across her back and proceeded to walk towards the urban area.

That's exactly where I need to go , Daisy thought as she followed Neva towards Sarasaland's capital citadel, Castle Town. Neither of the two noticed the Kruna of Earth's backpack was no longer on her person, ripped free and thrown onto a neighboring path.

Warra found Marut on the roof of Nimbus East Hospital. The Kruna of air was looking out into the distance, motionless and silent. For Marut to storm out of the hospital room the way he did raised an alarm among everyone. For such a childlike, lighthearted person to demonstrate such a drastic change in demeanor was nothing less than unsettling. No one was discrediting the fact that Marut had a right to grieve, but the last thing that anyone wanted to happen was for another person on their team to replicate Grekka's change of heart. *That's why I need to talk to you now,* Warra affirmed in thought. *I don't want to take the risk of waiting. Too easily can an opportunity arise for your thoughts to ravage you.* Marut heard Warra walk closer to him, but did not acknowledge his presence.

" It's understandable for you to be feeling theway you do," said Warra as he came to a stop a short distance away from his green-clothed teammate. "We all understand. As tough as it may seem, especially considering how soon it is after the fact, you have to let it go."

Marut perked up in anxious frustration and turned to face the Kruna of Water.

Warra didn't flinch. "Believe me. The best thing you can do is detach yourself from the situation, see it for what it is, take what you can learn from it, and let it pass."

"Please, spare me the lecture," Marut grumbled.

The Kruna of Water smiled. "I'll keep it short, because you do need

time to take in what happened, but I also think that you would benefit from some perspective so that you don't fall too far."

"Perspective?" Marut asked. "What does it matter? I don't have anybody now. My parents were gone before I even knew them, and now my uncle's gone. What the hell's the damn point – why don't I just die as well? What's the point of anything? If we're all just here to die, then tell me, what's the point?!"

"Easy there, sport," Warra murmured. "Just try to settle down a little."

"What makes you think you can tell me anything about how to feel or how to react?" Marut snapped, slowly sinking down to the floor in angry tears. "I feel so alone now. How could you possibly understand? My whole family's gone! What the hell am I supposed to feel? I'd like to see how you would react if all the people in your life that were important, that ever meant anything to you were dead. Maybe then I might take your perspective into consideration, because maybe then, you'd know how I feel!"

"It's an interesting concept," said Warra, momentarily pausing. "Which is why I understand. Everyone you're talking about is already dead."

At the conclusion of the Kruna of Water's statement, Marut's emotions seemed to freeze. He didn't say anything in response.

"I had my own team and duties before I became a part of our group here," Warra continued. "My family had a long tradition of being the servants and guardians to the leaders of Mekarsari, my homeland. Mekarsari is a city built on top of a large bay, with the larger structures anchored to the mainland by bridges and underwater poles, supports, and beams and smaller structures floating effortlessly on top of the water. It's quite the innovative design, and not constrained to the boundaries of land, but I digress. My father and mother were divorced. I have no idea whatever happened to my mother ever since she had left when I was a child. Not too long ago, my father, sister, and I along with other Mekarsari Guard members were sent away on a diplomatic mission to Pi'llo island, a mission that turned violent all too easily. I had to leave my girlfriend of nearly

seven years, Naomi, at home by herself for a week." He paused for a brief moment, taking a deep breath. "After our dealings on Pi'llo, we were ambushed by a ravenous group of Chain Chomps on the way back. They must've measured somewhere in the dozens. A moment of hesitation from me at the last minute cost the entire team their lives."

"You? Hesitate?" asked Marut. The air wielder's mind took him back to Warra's Aquavado hydrocannon against Necromancer and Necropaladin in a water-devoid environment and then to the risky tactic he used against Gargoyle Nukpana. *Those were actions done on impulse,* Marut thought to himself. *Sure, he's tactical, but he gambles. And he's trying to tell me that he actually hesitated before?*

"I was the only one that survived," Warra went on. "I still wonder how I managed to get away, or if I was even supposed to get away, but I carry the burden of the blame for the outcome of that event. I limped my way back home in shell shock...maybe 'chomp shock?' Whatever the term is. I returned to Mekarsari to find that a group of bandits broke into my house...and left Naomi slaughtered and gutted." He went silent for a few seconds, but Marut knew that he wasn't finished. Eventually, Warra managed to say, "I was supposed to be a father..."

Marut gasped, dumbfounded. "No way..."

"In less than two days, I lost my father, sister, girlfriend, unborn son, and all the members of my division of the Mekarsari Guard," said Warra. "But I live on, surviving the many nights I want to cry."

As Marut started rubbing some of his tears away, Warra walked over and held out his hand to help his air teammate back to his feet. The Kruna of Water noticed that Marut had calmed down a little.

"I've got six years on you, kid," murmured Warra. "I'm not exactly 'aged,' but I've been around. The point of my short little tale is not to awaken grief, and it's not to reject grief either. It's to give you some perspective. I guess none of us have exactly had it, 'easy,' per say. But at least you and I have been able to find a new team and a new family to help fill the void."

Marut turned away once more to look out over Nimbus Land, no words uttered.

Warra turned to walk back into the hospital. "Okay, now I'll give you some time to take this all in. We'll be waiting for you down in the lobby on the main floor when you're ready to go."

"So, Sarasa..." Marissa cooed, closing her eyes. "You've returned after all this time... and to do what?"

The pale, full-figured woman levitated above her graveyard behind her mansion lair. It was one of the few places in the Chai Kingdom that was a clearing free of tree growth, though the whole area was surrounded and concealed by a barrier of forestry on all sides. The demon witch herself wore an all-white dress with a double button-up black sleeveless shirt on top. The brightness of her dress was contrasted with black leggings underneath that fed into black boots, and she had a broom with a brown metal pole strapped to her back. Her thick black hair was long and scraggly, and overtop it was a tall black hat that had a big white bow. Her face was very reminiscent of Princess Peach from the Mushroom Kingdom, but was more square and the irises of her eyes were a fiendish yellow that seemed to house some sort of inner chaos that could never be spoken of around a dinner table. The most interesting trait she had was on her forehead where a mark rested that appeared to be a large dark red fleur-de-lis with a thick black "X" running through the top portion. A light red version of this same mark was on the center of her black shirt and was on the large and puffy white sleeves of her dress, implying that there was some sort of common theme or importance to that emblem.

"To die..." Marissa continued. "To die at the hands of her own father. Or maybe, just maybe, she'll manage to kill him instead. Not like it matters; in the end, she'll die...daddy'll die...everyone will die...everyone has always died...and yet...I will always breathe..." She rubbed the marking on her forehead as if she were trying to massage something *other* than her skull. "Then again, there's nothing in the laws of the universe that say that I can't make things more compelling. Family killing their own – I've seen that countless

times already. There needs to be some more enthralling zest added in to avoid an otherwise bland and boring rerun..." She started chuckling with malice, drool gathering around her mouth. "One more for the horde."

Even though she didn't have the best time as a child, Daisy was pretty sure she was going to at least feel a sense of nostalgia upon entering Sarasaland Castle Town. Instead, she hardly even recognized the place. As she and Neva progressed down the streets of Daisy's old stomping grounds, evidence of economic plight invaded their vision. No one appeared to recognize the Kruna of Earth, but a few people did turn their heads as if they faintly remembered her face. The inhabitants of Sarasaland appeared to be lower-middle class at best, surrounded by signs of mounting urban decay.

"Well, there goes the old neighborhood!" Daisy thought aloud.

"I think you'll find that the area closest to the Central Castle is the highlight of the kingdom," said Neva. "There's a sharp drop-off in wealth – and housing quality for that matter – the further away you move from the Central Castle. And when I say 'drop-off,' I'm not exaggerating. I wonder if the majority of Sarasaland's money is going to the Central Castle while the remainder is being spread across Castle Town and all four of the constituent kingdoms. Whatever's left over for the conquered provinces is almost certainly going straight to the military while the civilians and inhabitants there perish in poverty."

The battered, decrepit faces of the citizens varied, but they all had one trait in common; they were tired, and they were weak. Daisy and Neva both took note of a mother in what was once a white dress that had turned a dirty, tan hue. A couple buildings down, a kid with a broken arm was dribbling a soccer ball. His arm was in a sling. He had on a cast that looked as if it was several months old.

"It's probably only a matter of time before drug lords try to sneak their way into here," said Neva.

"This is madness," Daisy murmured in indignation. "Is he not aware of the repercussions of his selfish actions?"

"You think he cares?" Neva asked. "He's power mad; he wants as much control over as much land as possible. Whatever it takes."

"They've got to be ready to snap right about now," asserted Daisy. "This can't go on. They've got to be ready to revolt at any moment!"

"Fat chance," Neva spat out. "You go against the king, you go against the whole population."

Neva's remark drew strange stares from a handful of people, though no one said anything. The two earth and ice wielders kept moving.

"I don't understand," Daisy began. "Why are they all still behind my dad?"

"These people are blind," Neva explained. "They praise but they don't know. They're either too ignorant, too stubborn...or too hopeless and defeated to try and question the King. Then again, by the way they talk of and admire him, you wonder if they've somehow managed to put all their hope in him. False hopes and promises of glory and riches and prosperity should only be able to go so far, and yet, no one's challenging him." She lowered her voice to add, "Except for my resistance group, of course."

"How many?"

"Three, including me. There was four, but well, I said it earlier."

"Your best friend?"

Neva swallowed hard. "Yeah."

The golden glow of the early evening sky cast shadows throughout the city as Daisy and Neva continued closer towards the Central Castle area. Everywhere they looked, everyone and everything mirrored each other in dingy fatigue.

"We work in covertness," Neva whispered. "Nobody knows who we are, or what we do. And it stays that way. We can't do anything until

we are able to increase our number. So when you confront King Sarasa, you say nothing about the Sarasaland Resistance or my involvement. He doesn't know who exactly I am...yet."

"So was it my father who killed him?" asked Daisy. "Was it my father who killed your friend?"

Neva shook her head. "I wish I could say that. But it was during one of our runs through the Chai Kingdom north of here. He was cut down in Nova Form; the power and abilities of the person that took him out were absolutely insane, like something out of a horror movie, and-" She stopped talking and approached a poster that caught her eye.

"Voluntary Town Hall meeting," Daisy read off. "King Sarasa addresses Castle Town regarding the current status of Sarasaland. All this evening until sundown. All are welcome, free of charge. Location: The Western Sector at Sarasaland State University."

"What luck; that's about a mile from here!" Neva called out, taking a left turn to dart down an intersection. "C'mon, ground-clawer!"

Hundreds of citizens gathered around the stage setup on Sarasaland State University's football turf, awestruck by the king in all of his magnificence. It didn't matter how rugged and shabby they looked because King Sarasa's bright and brilliant orange, black, and silver fabrics made everyone feel like their clothes were just as glorious, even though that was far from the case. The king practically had his people in an alluring trance as he addressed them, pompous and arrogant in his demeanor. Vastus stood at the edge of the stage along with several guards, tattered much like the rest of the citizens but keeping an eye out to make sure that King Sarasa was not in harm's way. Daisy and Neva both ran up to the back of the crowd, catching sight of the Kruna of Earth's father. The amount of anger that began to swell within Daisy was as livid as it was instantaneous, but for the sake of not making a scene, she did not charge at him right away.

"We're staying back here for now," Neva said to Daisy. "We don't

need the whole town looking at us." She turned to look at Daisy when the earth wielder didn't respond. The black-clothed fighter's gaze was locked on King Sarasa, rage barely contained. Neva looked back towards the stage to lend her attention to what the king was saying.

"Our land is experiencing increasing growth and power," King Sarasa boomed. "The gains we are all making are set to be unprecedented and unlike that which the modern world has ever seen!"

The king's words drew cheers from the raucous crowd. Daisy and Neva shared a tense look before returning their gaze to the Kruna of Earth's father.

"Sarasaland is in for a great change," the king continued. "This shift will affect us all for the better and improve our quality and way of life! Of course, all our current and incoming prosperity would not have been possible without my strategic brilliance and my diplomatic talents!"

"What a turkey," Neva muttered.

"Diplomatic talents, huh?" Daisy growled in a near whisper. "Alright, I've heard enough already; let's go, Neva!" The Kruna of Earth started to shuffle her way deeper into the crowd towards the stage. Neva followed and kept close to her.

"We've accomplished so much as a nation," King Sarasa went on. "And as an empire, we will be able to accomplish so much more! I thank you all for your continued support for our great Sarasaland! However, I must address some very disconcerting and compelling issues that have rose to the forefront of the public. Now, I understand that we are having 'disappearances' of several of our citizens, mostly geared towards the direction of the Chai Kingdom. It is also to my general understanding that there are some people that are displeased with the way the Central Castle has been governing Sarasaland. These misguided people with radicalist views are even going so far as to say that we of the Central Castle are the ones behind all the missing people and that we are attempting a form of secret population control. I must put to rest the rumors of these

conspiracy theorists by confirming that the Central Castle has no involvement with whatever's going on in the Chai Kingdom, and we are actively investigating the area of interest for any suspicious activity!"

Daisy and Neva were about to squeeze their way into the front third of the crowd, listening to everything King Sarasa was saying as they moved closer and closer to the stage. Each sentence disgusted the two elemental wielders more and more.

"We must take the time now to frown upon these radicals who question my leadership!" King Sarasa projected. "They have no reason to say or show anything but good will and graciousness! I have maintained peace, freedom, justice, and security in Sarasaland! I have done nothing but do what was best for Sarasaland and its people! You all have secure housing, abundant food, clean water, and clothing; all things that I have worked hard for you all to have! Yes, we are in a sort of, economic down period, but the market is undulating! We must have down periods every so often to give ourselves the opportunity to fix the things that are not working or that are less efficient so that we can avoid crashes and further raise the ceiling for the potential of our great nation! I assure you all – in Sarasaland, the people are number one!"

The crowd erupted, elevating the decibel level of Sarasaland State's turf. Daisy and Neva continued forward with obvious distaste in their expressions, grumbling and shaking their heads.

"All those who criticize the gifts that I have blessed you with are enemies of Sarasaland!" the king declared. "I ask that in the face of the mounting adversity from these antagonists, that you continue to lend your support to our great land! Allow me to be the shepherd of your dreams as I lead us into a new era as a safe, secure, powerful, wealthy, and historic society!"

Now the crowd combined cheers with applause. King Sarasa smiled and waved to his people, basking in their admiration and devotion to him.

"Stop pouring all the money of Sarasaland into your military!" Daisy's voice hollered from the crowd. Her remark drew a mass uproar of

gasps and muffled responses.

"What was that..." King Sarasa mumbled.

"These people would truly be prosperous if you spread the wealth around instead of concentrating it for yourself!" Daisy yelled, her raspy voice straining as she raised her volume. "What good is taking over nations if you are not willing to financially support their health and well-being? How about you stop being a megalomaniac for once?!"

"Who deems themselves foolish enough to speak with such insipid ideas?" King Sarasa echoed. The crowd parted down the middle to each side to reveal a clear path in which Daisy and Neva stood.

"Well would you look at that," King Sarasa muttered with intrigue. "She's still alive." He raised his voice to yell, "Why don't you two step forward and join me on the stage here?"

Without hesitation, the two earth and ice wielders marched forward to the stage. The crowd gave them mixed stares of anger, disgust, shock, confusion, and disappointment as Daisy and Neva proceeded towards the king, but the two ignored the audience. Rather than walk around to take the stairs, the two elemental wielders both leapt up onto the stage and walked to the side of the king to face him without having their backs turned to the crowd. The king's guards remained in their positions, and the split crowd came back together to fill in the path they made.

"Attention everyone!" King Sarasa shouted. "Presenting the long lost princess...of Sarasaland! Heir to my throne!"

The crowd's reactions were now much more puzzled and angry than before. Some sounds of disapproval could be heard cropping up as if there were people in the crowd that remembered who Daisy was and all those rumors of ill-fate that surrounded her ascension to rule in the past. Daisy wasn't concerned with her reception, instead focusing on the proud ruler of Sarasaland. Neva kept silent, arms crossed and displaying a scowl.

"Welcome home..." King Sarasa crooned with a nasty smirk.

"Daughter..."

"This, is not my home, and you, are not my father," Daisy murmured.

"Oh...are you still bitter about the business with Tatanga?" asked King Sarasa. "It was a necessary evil – he and his legion would've leveled Sarasaland and stolen all of our resources you know. You should be grateful that you were able to save all these people-"

"You know, why I am bitter," the Kruna of Earth sneered.

"Ah yes," said the king. "Because you're just as much of an insubordinate brat as you were when you were a child. You don't know how good you would have had it had you stayed in line and accepted your duties as princess of this great land!"

The anger in Daisy's face intensified, but her voice remained muted. "No good would have came from what you wanted me to do – at least, not the way you would have wanted me to do it."

King Sarasa leaned over and lowered his voice so that only Daisy and Neva could hear him. "This is why you are still a recalcitrant delinquent; you would have learned so much if you had just stayed by my side as a loyal and perfect little girl. There's only one way to rule in this world, and it's by ruling with force and by ruling with the intent to expand your influence. When you rule, you are thrust into competition with the rest of existence for attaining the most dominion. The only thing that matters in this world is how much power you have. If you really think otherwise..." His near whisper then turned into a low growl. "...Then you'll have to pry Sarasaland from my cold, unmoving, lifeless hands."

Daisy showed a smug smile, but did not give any verbal response.

"You know too much, but you have much to learn," the king snarled. "For you see, loyalty grants me privileges such as this..." Daisy looked confused as King Sarasa stepped back. He turned to face the upset crowd and yelled, "I'm sorry, you all...but it has come to my attention that this person here is *not* Princess Daisy!"

"What?!" the Kruna of Earth snapped.

"Obviously, *this* person that we have right here before me is an impostor!" King Sarasa called out, gesturing to the crowd to get themselves riled up. "Trying to ruin our glorious and prosperous way of life!" He stuck a finger out at Daisy. "How dare you try to infiltrate and take over *my* kingdom!"

"She must be the one responsible for all the missing people!" someone called out from the crowd.

"Missing people?" Daisy wondered aloud.

"Run her outta town!" another person called out.

"Lock her up!" yelled another.

"Kill her!"

"Off with her head!"

"Rip her arms off!"

"Sterilize!"

"Daisy, I think we should leave now," Neva suggested.

The moment people started to advance towards the stage and head towards the stairs, Daisy and Neva both took off and ran off the back of the stage.

"Vastus!" the king boomed. "Arrest them both!"

Guards and people from the crowd all tried to chase Daisy and Neva, but the earth and ice wielders were moving much faster and were quickly gaining space.

"GO AHEAD AND RUN!" King Sarasa echoed. "THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN GOOD AT, HASN'T IT?!" He burst out in haughty laughter as the two elemental wielders circled around the turf and through Sarasaland State University's campus to evade any incoming pursuers. They kept running and looking back even after they stopped seeing people trying to chase them.

"Wow, what a welcome back party that was," Daisy muttered, not breaking her pace. "I don't understand; why does everyone love and support him? And why were they so eager to go against me when I'm the one that wants to liberate them from him?!"

"Well for one, everyone believes you abandoned them," Neva began, the two elemental wielders bursting off of Sarasaland State's grounds and into the streets. "Two, they also see you as a coward and a traitor to the Central Castle. Three, nobody liked you in the first place, so any reason to hate you gets tacked on to the resentment that people already have for you. Four, people that don't recognize you are going to submit to ad populum opinion and hate you anyways. I told you before we got here that you'll see what it's like and why things haven't been changing for the better around here."

Daisy and Neva both slowed their pace but were still running, making their way through the streets of Castle Town to return to the outer boundary of the city. By this time, the sun was almost over the horizon, and hues of blue and purple started to overtake the sky. It would be another ten minutes before they made it back out to the city limits. No one was following them at that point, but they both knew that it would be a poor decision to try and make their way back into Castle Town anytime soon.

"Well, Sarasa," Neva said, dusting her hands. "I've seen all I needed to see from you, so I'm going to be on my way."

"Wait, what?!" Daisy asked. "What do you mean?"

Neva began walking off towards one of the paths that lead away from Castle Town. "What did you think I was? Your buddy buddy? Your lover? I've got my own business to take care of, and I don't need you interfering, seeing how well you just handled business at the university. You're on your own from here on out, Sarasa." Without so much as a glance back or a wave, Neva went on in the direction she was heading in, leaving Daisy by herself.

"Well now what," Daisy wondered aloud. "How am I supposed to remove my father from power, or at least get him to change his ways?" She looked around and saw many paths in her periphery.

"Neva, I could have helped with your resistance. There was no need for you to rush on ahead without considering my potential to aid." The darkening atmosphere did not affect her sight thanks to her ability to see clearly in the dark, so she was not limited by the sun's rays. Still, there was no mistaking the fact that she needed to sleep, and the lack of recovery she had from her conflict against Elkon and his shrine guardians was really starting to eat away at her body.

I'll have to find some place out in the forests to get some sleep, the Kruna of Earth then thought. *No telling what I'm going to have to deal with in the coming days, so I can't afford to miss a night of sleep, nor can I procrastinate on my recovery any longer.*

Chapter V

Nightfall :

Some distance away from Sarasaland Castle Town, Daisy continued to march through the northeastern forests underneath the now nighttime sky. As she looked for a good spot to rest, she kept replaying all that her former master relayed to her in her head and all that she saw earlier from the time she met Neva to the time Neva left. *I'm not just going against my father, it seems,* she thought. *If I am to defeat that tyrannical king, I have to go against the whole of Sarasland. He's got the entire nation on his side; he's got a stranglehold on everyone in a way that prevents them from even realizing it! I have to stand against all of Sarasaland to make sure that the rest of the world doesn't become a target for my dad to impose his will on. How do I defeat something of this magnitude – how do I defeat an entire nation?*

I wonder if it was a bad idea to come here by myself, she mused. *Warra, I could use your help right about now. Bowser, Marut, Athelstan, Ramona, Andrew, maybe all seven of us Kruna combined could stand against my father, but am I really capable of doing it alone? I shouldn't be surprised if I fail in the end, should I? Was there any reason for me to come here by myself – yes, because this is my business. This is my father – and mother? I almost forgot about you! What role have you been playing in all this since I left? I don't even know if you're still here... but in any case, I am responsible for what either of my parents do and nobody else should have to shoulder my burden.*

What about this Marissa person? she remembered. *Shouldn't I be concerned about her too? I don't know what her deal is, but she seems exceptionally powerful based on what Neva and those two Black Mages said earlier. So I have to be on the lookout for her too! Man, can this get any tougher?*

The Kruna of Earth's thoughts were interrupted by a series of howls and growls echoing throughout the trees. She stopped her feet and

allowed her eyes to dart around to pick up on anything suspicious. She turned her head around in time to see seven hellhounds emerging from the underbrush, snarling and drooling.

"Well alright then," Daisy muttered. "No more dog treats for any of you all."

A few hellhounds barked, the others inching their way closer to Daisy. The black-clothed fighter crouched down, getting herself ready to do battle against the superpowered canines. She was beyond fatigued, but there was nothing she could do about it. These hellhounds looked ready to tear the muscles from her bones and the joints out of her sockets.

Then something overtook Daisy. A switch flipped inside of her, unprovoked. In response to the hostility and nastiness demonstrated by the hellhounds, Daisy let loose a growling roar unlike any she had ever made before. It sounded as if it was partially inhuman – it sounded *primordial.* The fierceness that she regularly displayed was startlingly amplified, causing the hellhounds to back off several feet, but maintain their grumbling. Before she was even able to acknowledge what it was that she just did, a bolt of mystical energy struck her dead center in her spine, freezing her in place. Paralyzed, Daisy was helpless against the Black Mage that leapt from the trees to lock her wrists in place with a heavy pair of metal cuffs. This Black Mage looked very similar to Kenn and Cephas, except he was dressed in white and black.

"Now I have you..." the Black Mage in white and black hissed with menace. He stood across from Daisy with his arms crossed. Interestingly, the voracious nature of the hellhounds had subsided. The demonic canines now looked no more harmful than a goomba.

"Might I ask what the deal is?" Daisy groused. "And might I also ask why I can't move from the neck down?"

"This paralysis spell will wear off within a couple minutes," the Black Mage replied. "I just needed to make sure that you were restrained before I took you to Lord Arkana."

"Lord Arkana," murmured Daisy. "That's right... Marissa, that demon

witch I keep hearing about..."

"When feeling returns to your legs, you will follow me, Solovar," the Black Mage said. "Lord Arkana will then deal with you herself."

"And if I decline?"

"You put up any resistance, and you will have to deal with the hellhounds before being dragged to her covered in your own blood."

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess I have no choice," the Kruna of Earth carelessly muttered.

Solovar waved his hand, signaling for the hellhounds to retreat back into the forests. "The moment Lord Arkana became aware of your presence, you never did."

Daisy smirked and looked at her heavy metal bonds. "I feel so special. What does she want with me anyways?"

"I do not know. You will find out. Now, once the paralysis spell has worn off, you will follow me into the deeper portions of these Chai Kingdom forests to Marissa's Lair where she will determine your fate."

Marut pushed open the doors to his uncle's house, Bowser, Ramona, Andrew, and Warra all following him in. It was a small, customary, three-bedroom building on the outer portion of Nimbus Land, and it was empty. The late afternoon sky was winding down in brightness, beginning its transition into a golden hue since Nimbus Land was a handful of timezones east of the Mushroom Kingdom.

"I grew up here," said the Kruna of Air. He seemed to be back to his normal self, but he was much more reserved than he usually was. "I've been here since I was born, and my uncle was here since then after my mother died. And now, no one's here... This house is technically mine now, isn't it?"

Warra nodded. "Yeah, it would appear to be so."

Marut sighed. "I don 't know if I want to keep this house though. I don't even know if I want to stay here."

"I wouldn't just get rid of it, Marut," stated Warra. "You never know; it may turn out useful in the future."

"It might," replied Marut. "But I've been in this house my whole life. I think it's time for a change."

"I understand," said Bowser. "Before my palace, I had a castle. It was a grand and excellently-built structure, but I had to move on from it. I needed a change in my life, and the castle was holding down memories and other thoughts, images, and ideas, good and bad, that I felt I needed to abandon and leave behind."

"I think I may still keep ownership of it," Marut thought aloud. "I don't think I'm gonna get rid of it outright. Like, I'll still keep most of the stuff here where it is, and I'll keep the keys... but... my visits here will be very few and far between, if at all. It's hard to explain what I'm feeling or thinking, really. I've never really let myself address such things. I sorta just try and keep myself distracted from stuff like this so that I don't have to address or acknowledge it, you know? But now, I just really can't avoid it now, can I? I'm making no sense – I'm pretty confused. All that being said, since this'll be the last time I'm here for a while – if I ever return in the future – is it alright with you guys if we all chilled-out here for the rest of the day? I just want to spend some time here for a little while, maybe gather some things together to take down."

"Of course, Marut!" replied Ramona.

"Yeah," Bowser agreed, putting a hand on the shoulder of the air wielder. "We can go back down to the surface tomorrow."

"Thanks, you guys," said Marut. "It means a lot..." His voice trailed off. He tried to show a smile, but his expression was more blank than anything else.

"Are you sure you're alright?" asked Andrew.

"I'm getting there," the Kruna of Air answered. "I'm not there yet but I

will be eventually." He paused and then changed the subject. "Why don't we head into the kitchen and see what I have in the fridge? Don't want any of that stuff to go to waste!"

Within The Deep Wood, the densest and most remote of the Chai Kingdom's forests, was a vast, gated clearing in which a Gothic mansion stood. Solovar directed Daisy through the gates into the vast yard of Marissa's Lair. An ominous, thick haze pervaded the air, distorting the shine from the halfmoon and the glowing eyes of the numerous watching hellhounds.

"Tell me, Sarasa," Solovar started to say as he led her towards the mansion. "Do you feel fear now?"

"The hell do I need to feel fear for?" Daisy sneered. "We're walking through fog, passing a bunch of angry pets, and heading towards a building that looks more suited for a bunch of hippy teens and a talking dog."

"Cocky, I see," Solovar muttered. "That's going to get you into trouble very easily."

Daisy looked at her metal bonds, bored. "I'm sorry Mr. Solovar – I'll try and be a good widdle girl from now on." She then viscerally spat at the ground.

"You've definitely inherited some of the arrogant spite of your father, haven't you?"

"No, I think you just caught me in a bad mood," Daisy replied, half-serious. "And that statement made me even more agitated. Don't compare me to him."

Solovar shrugged. "It's of no difference to me."

Once they got to the front doors of the mansion, Solovar opened them and directed Daisy inside. The interior of Marissa's Lair was dimly lit and moderately ornamental. The building had old world and modern elements incorporated into its design.

It was at this point that Daisy picked up on a formidable energy signature. *I'm sensing something... different,* she thought. *No mistaking its power, but, it's beyond wicked. It feels incredibly unstable – not as if it's going to collapse, but as if it's... volatile... deranged!*

The white and black-clothed Black Mage continued leading the Kruna of Earth through the expansive hallways and down three basement floors into the bottom-most level, the Catacombs. It was in this area that the architecture became strikingly macabre and grotesque. Not only did these underhalls resemble a cave more than an actual portion of a building, but the walls appeared to be constructed of countless skulls imperfectly fused together. The torches that lit the Catacombs were dim, just managing to illuminate the floor. Daisy could see her breath as she followed Solovar deeper into the Catacombs towards a large, bronze door with a fleur-de-lis overlapping an inverted pentagram etched all across its surface.

"What you are about to witness is the ultimate being," said Solovar. "For it is on the other side of this door that Lord Arkana awaits on her throne."

"She has her own throne room – man!" Daisy called out, rolling her eyes.

Solovar waved a hand, using mystical energy to cause the door to slide into its slot in the wall. The two stepped into the room, the one area of the Catacombs that actually resembled the higher floors of the mansion. The demon witch herself hovered over her throne, legs crossed, eyes closed, appearing to be in a deep trance. Without warning, a bloodcurdling hiss echoed throughout the Catacombs and into their chamber to assault the eardrums of all those unfortunate enough to hear it.

"What was that?" Daisy asked with a scowl.

"A hellhound unlike any other," Marissa whispered, opening her eyes to lay her gaze upon the two approaching beings. "My pride and joy, but he's in his room, safe from the outside world."

"I have brought you the princess, as you have asked," stated

Solovar. "The other Sweeps are most likely on their way back from the search."

"You're early, Solovar," said Marissa. "Or are you late? I can't tell time anymore – not that it matters what time it is to me. Time will never matter to me again. All I know is that the sun goes up and the moon comes around and all should be plagued with terror when they fall asleep, day or night."

"So," the Kruna of Earth began. "I take it you're this demon witch I've been hearing about so much lately?"

"How convenient," Marissa cooed. "You know who I am... and of course... I know who you are." Her voice was alluring and coquettish, yet it seemed to be hiding something akin to a type of pure, demented insanity that was mortally impossible to attain. "After all this time, you finally decided to return. Foolish behavior. I hope you realize that Sarasaland is *my* territory."

"And how can you say that?" Daisy wondered. "I was just there; my dad has utter dominance over the place."

"Your father's an incompetent pig, not fit to be a ruler," Marissa snided. "I hate that man with a passion. Leaders should be judged by the quality of their conquests, not the reach of their influence. Sure, he's succeeded in taking control of all these smaller, lesser known territories, but what about the big, influential nations? He's shied away from those. His image is a facade. I sense fear in his actions. He doesn't want to lose. He wants to fight battles he's sure to win just to fuel his ego and give him the false impression of some legendary warlord. That was cute at first, but now it's just annoying. He's a coward, and deep down, he knows it; that is of course, unless his pride is preventing him from realizing that. I will give him this though; he's done an excellent job expanding Sarasaland and gaining control of the territories he was ballsy enough to go out and take. I commend him for that, which is why I will be extra gratuitous when I slit his throat in front of whatever will be leftover of his 'loyal' people. I shouldn't have to explain myself any further though; when the moon rises in the sky twenty-two more times, then you will know."

"Sorry," Daisy remarked. "But I'm not going to wait around for three weeks and allow you to carry out whatever it is you're trying to do!"

Marissa narrowed her eyes and smiled, drifting down to the floor and towards Daisy. "I know you won't. In fact, I don't want you to." She touched her feet down onto the ground in front of the Kruna of Earth and began to intrusively slither around her a couple times before stopping to face her. The distance between their noses was less than a foot, though the demon witch's height put her nose a couple inches higher from the ground. "Such beauty. Your perky, young little face, your smooth and enchanting autumn hair, your strong and muscular, yet feminine and supple arms..."

"... Uh, excuse me?" Daisy asked, with an eyebrow raised.

Marissa put her finger up to Daisy's lips, and stared at her with innocent eyes. "I'm still examining. Don't be rude." The witch snaked around behind Daisy and ran her fingertips all along Daisy's arms. "I love these shoulders of yours," she whispered in Daisy's ear. "Strong and cute... that's *quite* the combination. You know what? I like you. I like you a lot. Would you like some tea? Coffee? Chuckocinno? Hoolumbian?"

"Why do I want caffeine this late at night?" questioned Daisy.

Marissa sucked her teeth. "I'm trying to be hospitable! I don't have company here too often. Now don't you want a liquid libation to ease your frustration?"

"I'd much rather you just tell me why you had me brought here already!" Daisy snapped.

"My, someone's impatient," Marissa crooned, dancing around each syllable. "All I want to do is remove your father from his position. That's all. I believe I can lead Sarasaland better than he can and in a way that benefits all citizens, not just the governing bodies. It's to my understanding through my Malocchio that you came here to dethrone King Sarasa as well, is that correct?"

"Well, yes," said Daisy. "Quick question; what's the Malocchio?"

Marissa shifted to the other side of Daisy's back, ignoring the Kruna of Earth's question. "There's only one thing that the king is doing right and that is leadership. The people of Sarasaland obey him and are loyal to him because they know him as an almighty ruler. They view his conquests as proof that none can challenge him and as a reassurance of safety and security, no matter how he himself treats them. They do not dare question his authority. In an odd way, they fear him in much the same way that he fears the more powerful and larger nations of the world. That is leadership, Daisy. That is how Sarasaland should be treating you. You are the king's daughter, after all. They shouldn't hate you the way they have." The demon witch turned to Solovar. "Let's release her from her shackles. She's no threat to us."

Daisy was ready to challenge Marissa's words with a sassy retort, but found herself compelled to listen. Solovar stepped over and laid a magical touch upon Daisy's bonds, causing the heavy braces to unbuckle and fall off. Now free, Daisy could have shook off Marissa and made a dash for the exit, but she didn't. She didn't know how, or why, but she wanted to hear what this peculiar fiend had to say.

"We're all in prison," said Lord Arkana, caressing Daisy's shoulders. "There's no need for representation of it."

How does she know so much? Daisy wondered. *And how much more does she know? I bet it has something to do with that Malocchio, but she won't say what it is!*

A handful of hellhounds entered the room and gathered around Solovar. They sat down by the white and black-clothed Sweep and stared at Marissa and Daisy.

"My hellhound horde is legion, Daisy," the demon witch went on. "Definitely more formidable specimens than your typical human." A few of the hellhounds made some sounds that passed for laughter among their kind.

"They are loyal to Lord Arkana and to us Sweeps," said Solovar, earning a nod from Marissa herself.

"I'm... confused," mumbled Daisy. "Where are you going with all

this?"

"You know, we could be a great partners together," Marissa proposed. "You, me, my Sweeps, my hellhound horde... Don't you think that would be enough to cut through Sarasaland's forces and overthrow King Sarasa himself?" She paused for a brief moment, continuing to massage the Kruna of Earth's shoulders and arms. She made an abrupt change in tone as she said, "Unless of course, Sarasaland doesn't mean anything to you-"

"Of course it means something to me!" Daisy exclaimed. "It's my home – I mean, it was my home. Or, it was supposed to be my home. Or, I thought it was my home. It never really felt like home. Nowhere ever felt like home..."

"You can have a home," Marissa assured, her tone back to normal. "Sarasaland can be your home, Daisy, to rule as you see fit. All you need to do is assist me in getting rid of your father. Help me help you."

Daisy's expression was intense. "I... I don't know. I mean... I never cared much for having control or any sort of political influence over a nation-"

"Which is why I ask that you become my partner," said Lord Arkana. "It is through me that you can get the respect from Sarasaland that you deserve. I will be the one leading and handling all the boring political stuff, but the authority and respect will overlap to you as well, along with to my Sweeps." She waited for a response, but then continued once she realized that Daisy was at a loss for words. "Only through me do you have a chance of defeating your father, Sarasa. You will never be able to win on your own. They will eat you alive faster than my hellhounds ever could."

"Aren't you upset about those two Sweeps of yours that died earlier?" asked Daisy.

"Collateral," Marissa nonchalantly replied. "It happens. It wasn't your doing anyways. There's six others that are obviously better than they are, Solovar here being one of them." She let go of Daisy and sauntered back around to stand in front of the Kruna of Earth. "Face

it, Sarasa. You need me. If he doesn't end up causing his own downfall, your dad's going to screw up everything, and I don't just mean everything within Sarasaland's boundaries."

What about Neva and her resistance? Daisy wondered. *Why can't I team up with her? Sure, she's got a mouth to her, but at least she doesn't seem as sketchy as this woman here. Marissa Arkana, a demon witch? She has to have some kind of ulterior motive that she's not saying a thing about. If I accept her offer – if I ally with her and her Sweeps and hellhounds, then I'm that much closer to freeing Sarasaland from my father, but what does that mean? Marissa would replace him, but what would she do as the ruler of Sarasaland? Who's to say she won't be the same, if not worse, than my father?*

Another, angrier mindset influenced the Kruna of Earth's thoughts. *What should it matter how my dad gets removed from the throne as long as it happens? This witch is absurdly powerful; we'd cut through all of his forces in record time. These people should be grateful that I'm going through all this for them, not hateful! They did nothing but hound me before I left, and it's no better now that I've returned. If they got a problem with me and the fact that I've come back to liberate them, then they can come bark at me face to face and I'll straighten them all out so they can shut up for once!*

"You've had enough time to mull over it," stated Marissa. "Now say, 'yes, Miss Arkana,' so we can move on to our next course of action."

… But is that really the best way to go about this, Daisy mused. *What would Terran say? Grekka? Elkon? They're all looking down on me now, and I can't disappoint them. There's a right way and a wrong way to handle this situation... isn't there?*

"Are you going to say something or are you petrified?" questioned Marissa.

"Yeah – what's this floor made out of again?" Daisy asked, looking down at the bricks that made up the ground they were standing on.

"Bricks of clay," Marissa answered.

"That's what I thought," Daisy responded. She stomped her right foot into the ground to kick up one of the large bricks into the air. The mass slammed into Marissa's chin and knocked her back a couple steps, but otherwise appeared to accomplish next to nothing. The demon witch showed no sign of pain or discomfort.

"That was pointless," Marissa scorned with a grin.

"Bite me," the Kruna of Earth spat.

"Oh, playing hard to get I see," the demon witch groused, her tone deepening and growing sharp. "So you like games, do you?" Marissa enchanted her hands with magic and performed a complicated series of quick hand signs before flaring her teeth, revealing two sharp fangs on the left and right side of her mouth. Before Daisy's eyes could register Marissa's afterimage, the demon witch was behind her again. Into Daisy's neck went Lord Arkana's fangs, penetrating through to an artery. For the few seconds that the demon witch had her teeth in Daisy's neck, the Kruna of Earth could feel something *entering* her, as if she was being injected with *something* . Daisy kept quiet, even with the sharp pain that was shooting and spreading throughout her body. Finished with her task, Marissa pulled back from Daisy's neck and danced back around to the front of the earth wielder. The demon witch licked the blood from her teeth and lips.

"What was THAT FOR?!" Daisy grunted.

"You said, 'bite me,' " Marissa softly stated. "Enjoy the venom."

"What?!" Daisy asked, perplexed. Suddenly, blood began to pool in her heart. A spasm jerked the Kruna of Earth's body. An instant later, she buckled down to the floor on all fours in visible agony. Her grunting in pain turned into a growling sound of discord as her heart began to work double overtime, pumping blood throughout her body at an explosive rate and catalyzing a horrific metamorphosis. Her body changed altogether at once. Daisy's hair rustled, and her nose compressed to become pointy. She grimaced as her teeth sharpened to equal that of a wolf's. Her clavicles and scapula expanded and stretched to make the skeleton of her already capped shoulders broad and hulking. Her muscle mass began to increase

substantially, with the majority of the new bulk around her upper back, shoulders, neck, and hamstrings. The nails of her hands fused with her fingers to become claws, and her eyes took on the likeness of a feline. Blood from Daisy's bite mark was dripping on the floor, but Marissa didn't seem to mind and was obnoxiously cackling as the transformation went on. Daisy's forearms became covered in calluses and her ears warped to become sharp and angled. Her eye lids and surrounding area were stained purple, yet the rest of her skin altogether lightened a handful of shades and became markedly pale. The Kruna of Earth now resembled a great beast.

"You know, I practically never inject my Betedaimon venom directly from my teeth..." Marissa began. "But I made a rare exception since your saucy-self asked for it."

The transformation over, Daisy pushed off from the floor to get back to standing on two feet. Her face was minimally affected, but her form from the waist down was hideously disfigured. Her humanoid body looked like it was having a hard time supporting her now bestial build.

"That's funny," Marissa muttered with a slight frown. "For some reason, my venom didn't finish the job this time..."

"Why do I feel so... mad?" Daisy scowled. The rasp in her voice was now accompanied by gruffness.

"I guess you'll need another shot of venom," Marissa murmured, bringing her hands together to repeat her signs. "Unless of course, now you've changed your mind and are ready to join me by my side, my cute little pet."

Daisy began grumbling. "Not a chance. Never, especially not after you've done... whatever it is you've done to me!"

"Then die," Marissa said in an ominously low tone. The demon witch snapped her fingers and the throne room filled up with dozens of hellhounds. "Can't say I didn't try to be nice."

Daisy smirked and got into position to focus her elemental energies. "You had one big mistake to make and you've made it, so I'm not

holding back anything now!" A silvery aura erupted from the Kruna of Earth. Within moments, the waves of energy intensified, stopping the hellhounds in their tracks but confusing Daisy herself. *I'm trying to refocus my energy!* she thought. *Not charge and release!* A couple of seconds later, the aura popped and disbanded. All in the room were as silent as they were motionless.

It was only then that Daisy realized what was wrong. *I can't use my Nova Form!* she exclaimed in her mind.

"You know, I should be sad about this!" Marissa yelled with a cocked head. "I should be, shouldn't I? I don't know! I'm more amused than anything else!" She resumed her obscene laughing that was annoying both Daisy and Solovar.

"Alright – you're just straight-up crazy!" Daisy growled.

"Crazy is as crazy does," Marissa cackled, grabbing and tugging her dress near her crotch. Solovar tried to keep an upright posture, knowing that his head would most likely be sliced off if he let any sort of laugh directed at his overlord escape from him. The demon witch then made a loud clap, causing a sound that roused the hellhounds from their otherwise tranquil state.

Think, think, think, Daisy rambled in her mind. *Gotta get outta here – I'm outnumbered and outmatched...*

The next sequence of events happened in under twenty seamless seconds. The hellhounds started to swarm the Kruna of Earth, ready to pounce and rip her to shreds. Daisy seemed to relinquish all thought and semblance of awareness as she engaged in senseless and ungraceful advances that could only be described as a bull rush towards the chamber doorway. The hellhounds themselves were not very powerful – they were essentially mooks – but their sheer numbers were plenty to have to overcome. Nonetheless, she bulldozed her way towards the exit like a battering ram and busted through those hellhounds that were in her way. On Marissa's command, nearly all of the hellhounds that had gathered in the chamber went to chase after the fleeing earth wielder.

"Solovar!" Marissa screeched. "You let her get away, you foolishly

foolish fool!"

" *I* let her get away?!" Solovar replied. "She got away on her own!"

"Find her and chase after her and drag her back here, Solovar," Marissa said like a begging kid. "I want her to die in front of me! She's being unruly and irrational!"

"You don't expect me to do it by myself, do you?"

"This sounds like you're being a coward."

"With all due respect, she just rampaged through over a dozen of our hellhounds to get to the exit!"

Marissa put her hands on her hips. "And that sounds like it's not my problem! Assemble more hellhounds and get the other Sweeps damnit – do you need me to hold your hand?!"

Chapter VI

The Beast Within :

Daisy dashed through the halls of the Catacombs to get to the stairs and began ascending through the floors back to the surface. The hellhounds kept close to her however, locking on to her scent and making sure she remained within the eyesight of the front-most dogs. There was nothing that Daisy could do to shake the hellhounds. Whenever she tried to burst ahead, the hellhounds maintained pace with a burst of their own. Oddly enough, the ravenous dogs seemed content with chasing the fleeing earth wielder until she either ran into a dead end or passed out from fatigue.

I hate having to run like this, Daisy thought. *Unfortunately, I don't have a choice in the matter at this time. There's just too many, and I am too beaten up and disfigured to be able to put up at least a decent fight.* With every handful of hallways she bolted through, a couple more hellhounds took up the chase. Even though her nervous system never had a chance to adapt to her new physiology, she found that her speed, agility, and physical might all made a stark increase. The few hellhounds that ran up in front of her, Daisy was able to either leap around or swat away with incredible ease. And yet, she could feel that her connection with elemental earth and her energy were both distorted and unstable. To her, it was as if her elemental affinity was tainted in a way that limited her ability to wield earth.

Daisy shot up another flight of stairs with the hellhounds in full tow. She successfully backtracked, reaching the ground floor without getting herself lost. More hellhounds began to gather from the ground and upper levels to attempt to blockade Daisy, but that did not stop her. For her, she either had to bulldoze through all the hellhounds, or fall to the ambush and incoming pursuit. The choice was easy to make; she braced herself and lowered her shoulders. *I'm going to have lost a ton of blood however this turns out,* she thought.

Adrenaline surging to give her an extra boost, the Kruna of Earth shot through the gathered hellhounds and continued her dash towards the entrance to Marissa's Lair. She could feel the lowering of her internal pressure as a result of the several claws and teeth that ripped at her exposed arms. But there was nothing she could do about that. She had to keep running, she had to keep her eyes ahead to rush through the doors that became ever closer with each step she took. She had to be mindful of the growls and shrieks that became more and more audible the closer she got to the door. The hellhounds were not going to let her escape, and neither would her body. The moment she rammed through the front doors to reach back outside, the hellhounds came to within striking distance. She had not made it more than ten steps past the doorway when the fiendish canines leapt up into the air to pounce on their prey.

Just when Daisy was all but finished, a light emerged overhead, lighting up the mansion's front yard and stopping all the pursuing hellhounds in their tracks. As Daisy collapsed to the floor, she felt a figure grab at her and lift her off the ground, yet she could not see who... or what... it was that grabbed her. All the Kruna of Earth saw for several seconds was bright, blinding light in all directions. Then Daisy saw nothing but darkness.

"Sun's gone down," Ramona murmured, gazing out of the living room window. Marut's house was designed in a way so that the kitchen and living room were one large space. "I'm always too scared to go out at night by myself! It's a good thing my best friend's a shadow wielder, right Andrew?"

"Look! I'm Rocky Balboa!" Andrew grunted, cracking two eggs over his open mouth. His intention was to swallow the raw whites and yolks, but once they got on his tongue, he grimaced and spat it all out in the sink. "No! That's a horrible idea! Who told him to eat raw eggs?"

"Who told *you* to eat raw eggs?" muttered Bowser. "That's something I expected Marut to do."

"That is something I would have wanted to do," Marut remarked,

scratching his head. He turned to Bowser and saw the koopa fixing up a ton of lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower altogether into a bowl. "Uh, dude? You know I have some beef and deer meat in the fridge."

Bowser turned up his nose. "While I could ingest animal meats, I prefer fueling my body with that which nature produces."

"That's a surprise," stated Marut.

"What?" Bowser started. "You think that just because my teeth are sharp that I'm a carnivore? We koopas simply have the capacity for digestion of animal tissue. A koopa's teeth can vary widely. Mine are not as sharp as they appear. We are omnivores; vegans by nature, but meat-eaters when necessary."

"Fascinating," Ramona whispered in amazement.

Bowser grinned. "I will admit though that I have a weakness for fish." He peered at Warra, who was on the couch with his hands cupped. "What's going on with you, all silent over there and blank in the face?"

"I just..." Warra began, not too present when he answered. "I just wonder what Daisy's up to. I just can't get her off my mind. I mean, where would she have needed to go where she wouldn't want us to tag along?"

"Just trust that she knows what she's doing," said Bowser "Don't think about it too much. To me, it seems like she has a habit of going off and doing stuff like that."

"A girl's intuition can escape many!" Ramona remarked.

Bowser chuckled. "Meh, she's not a girl – she's a frickin' tank. A frickin' portable tank of mass destruction. I swear, if she isn't the most erratic, disorganized, rowdy person with the most inelegant technique – or lack thereof, rather – then please, somebody suggest someone worse."

"That lack of grace helped us out last week," said Ramona, smiling.

"It makes me feel like I'm incapable of helping her out," Warra muttered. "I really think we should have at least followed her."

"It's not like we know where she went," stated Bowser with a shrug. "She just said she needed to go somewhere as soon as she could. That's it. So she's on her own, whether we like it or not."

"Seems to me like you don't care too much, Bowser," said the Kruna of Water.

"Seems to me like you care too much," replied Bowser. "What happens to her is out of our hands. For now, at least. We have the opportunity to rest now, so just relax already."

"Still, it's strange not having her around," murmured Warra.

"Yeah, we need Daisy here," said Andrew. "I don't know how *anybody* can, like, not have her around."

Bowser nodded. "Athelstan too. Here's hoping he'll be waiting for us back at the palace tomorrow with some helpful information. He might be back at the palace right now for all we know."

Athelstan sat alone at a desk in the expansive Cosmic Archives, reading aloud from the Book of Alkemei Rosalina lent him. He was intrigued by what he read, but he was tired and sleepy as well. Nonetheless, he was too engrossed by the various Pendants of Power chronicled in the pages to put down the book.

The Kruna of Stone rubbed his eyes and got ready to read off more from the book. "Alright, 'Alkemei Antioch – Pendant of Speed – Temporarily doubles the user's movement speed.' Seems simple enough, but then again, if a user's speed is multiplied by a factor of two, then that means the amplification of a faster user is going to be much higher than one of a really slow person. That sounds like something Marut or Daisy could use. 'Alkemei Jiles – Pendant of Shielding – creates a transparent shield around the user for as long as he or she maintains concentration. Shield strength is dependent on the amount of energy the user transmits into the pendant.' I might

take note of that."

Rosalina strolled into the room, impressed by the intensive study of Athelstan. "How goes it, my mighty Kruna of Stone?"

"I simply can not believe the amount of pendants that exist!" exclaimed Athelstan. "The powers of these are more diverse than I would have thought!"

"For the lower level pendants, there are actually a few extra of each out there in the world," said Rosalina. "There are only single copies of moderate level pendants and up, though." The Elder of the Cosmos walked around the desk to stand over the stone wielder's shoulder and peer at the page he was reading. "If I have not mentioned it already, be aware that the pendants work only as long as you can sustain them with your energy, so there is no way for your Alkemei powers to be utilized if you're too low on energy. See anything particularly impressive?"

"Well... " Athelstan began, flipping back through the pages. "There's this one; the, 'Alkemei Zero – Pendant of Self-Detonation – enables the user the ability to build up the remainder of their energy to create a massive explosion from within their body.' You know... that seems kinda redundant... But impressive in that a pendant was actually made to accommodate such an action."

"It's not a pendant that you can use very often, as you can probably tell."

Athelstan skimmed through the pages some more. "What was up with this one? The 'Alkemei Metafrash – Pendant of Repulsion – allows the user to hurl objects away from the user at high speed.' That just seems broken! It must use up a ton of energy, otherwise I would hate to be the one that has to face a person in possession of a Metafrash."

"So would I," the Cosmic Queen remarked.

"Wait a minute... 'Alkemei Griffen – Pendant of Accuracy – always active at a low level, pendant allows the user to use any inanimate object as a projectile weapon and hit the target he or she was

aiming at.' That must mean that if I were to throw a barrel, or a tire... or a banana... then they would act like heat-seeking missiles and hit wherever – or whoever – I aimed at. Now that seems like a great utility to have around! That must also mean that we can impose our will onto the actions of these pendants."

Rosalina nodded. "You will it to work. Think of it as an extension of your body, much like your elemental tools. Again, you need to have the necessary energy available, but all you need do is form a mental link with the pendant, and it becomes as simple as moving an arm."

"So these pendants range from attribute boosts to new abilities to entirely separate powers altogether!" stated Athelstan, flipping forward through the book. "It's probably a good thing these were scattered and made hidden!"

"I agree," said Rosalina. "Even though the Master Pendant was the only dangerous, malevolent Alkemei, all of the others could easily be taken advantage of by even the morally ambiguous."

"Holy crap," Athelstan muttered. "This one is brutal. 'Alkemei Rai – Pendant of Chain Lightning – allows the user to create a bolt of lightning that spreads from one target to multiple other potential targets in the immediate vicinity!' Man, that's scary! I don't know what's worse; the Metafrash or the Rai!"

The Elder of the Cosmos chuckled. "Some of the pendants can manipulate the elements in ways that can not be managed by an elemental wielder. If you look deeper into the book, you'll see that there are Alkemei more powerful than the Master Pendant. I don't recall the proper names off the top of my head, but there is a Pendant of Creation, a Pendant of Clairvoyance, and a Pendant of Regeneration among several others."

"Woah," Athelstan murmured. "What's the most powerful Alkemei?"

Rosalina smiled. "Depends on what you would use it for; the answers to that question are all entirely subjective and vary by whoever you ask."

"And what if someone wears more than one Alkemei?" Athelstan

asked.

"Well for one thing, it won't work," answered Rosalina. "Neither pendant would work because there would be no way to differentiate the mental link between the two pendants. They'd cancel each other out and nothing would happen, so you would just waste your energy." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a gray pendant within a silver component attached to a gray chain. "Which reminds me that I have one that I think you should keep with you, if you so desire, that is."

Athelstan turned around to face Rosalina, eyeing the Alkemei in her hands. "Are you sure about that?"

"Something's telling me that it's possible that you may need this sooner than I originally thought," said Rosalina. "I'm not going to ask why I am feeling this way, for intuition's sake. I just know that something is amiss in the atmosphere, so I will trust your judgment, Athelstan. This is the only Alkemei that I have on hand, however, but I know that it is perfectly suited for you." She handed the pendant to the Kruna of Stone.

"Does it work?" Athelstan asked. "It looks dead!"

"It only appears so because there's no elemental energy flowing through it. Excluding the Master Pendant, all the gems and chains of the Alkemei are gray, but once a person adorns one, then the gray components of the Alkemei change color to match the elemental affinity of the user, regardless of whether the user is an elemental wielder or not."

"So which pendant is this?"

"What I have just given you is the Alkemei Odina," Rosalina explained. "Pendant of Strength. This Alkemei works on your nervous system to double your physical strength without affecting your body mass. Since stone wielders are naturally geared towards great physical might, this pendant is perfect for your personal inventory."

Athelstan took the Odina from Rosalina and placed it in his pocket.

"Thank you, Grand Elder."

"Do be sure to take note of the map in the back of the book," said Rosalina. "The last known locations of all the Alkemei are marked on that very map. Let me know when you have concluded your studies so that I may take you back to Bowser's Palace."

"Well would you look at that," said Neva, scanning over the awakening Daisy. "A bipedal beast."

"What happened?" Daisy muttered, forcing herself up to her feet. "Where am I?" She looked around and saw nothing but Neva and darkness. They were outside on one of the paths through the lands between Sarasaland Castle Town and the Chai Kingdom. "Did you bring me here?"

"What? Me?" Neva asked. "I didn't do a thing. I was scouting around through the area for hellhounds and Sweeps and saw your sorry ass lying there as if you drank yourself stupid."

Daisy frowned. "... Crude. Too bad I don't drink. Listen, I had a run-in with Marissa-"

"I can tell," stated Neva, crossing her arms. "Only the demon witch would be capable of doing *that* to you, unless of course, you were able to turn into this... 'thing,' all along." Her tone then turned condescending. "I should thank you. Sarasa."

"For what?"

"Well, if you hadn't of made me want to storm off without you, then I would've ended up looking just the way you look now!"

Daisy sighed. "Gee, thanks."

"I'm exponentially more surprised that you survived than I am that you've been transformed into this bestial form. Although, I am confused now; are you going to eat dog biscuits from now on or Meow Mix?"

"I'm going to eat you if you don't zip it already. How's that sound?"

"I wouldn't hold that past you," replied Neva. "I guess we can't say it would be cannibalism, can we?"

"Even if I hadn't of became whatever I am now, it still wouldn't have been cannibalism," Daisy grunted with a smirk.

"You're so pitiable; I feel sorry for you," Neva spat. "And at the same time, I really don't give a damn. So now you see what I have to deal with here, Sarasa. Marissa's forces are as much of an enemy to Sarasaland as my resistance is. And you know what; she's just as bad as your dad, if not worse. This is a three-sided battle, in case you haven't noticed."

"She tried to get me on her side," said Daisy. "I honestly was considering it for a moment, but the aura that she gave off just screamed pure wickedness... and yet, I was... allured."

"... Alright," Neva began. "Before you say anything else, you're coming with me to the Sarasaland Resistance base as a new recruit. The last thing I need to have to worry about is another pawn working for Marissa. Or then again, I can just kill you now and not have to worry about you at all..."

"What are you saying?"

"Join me or die."

Daisy paused. *You and Marissa are more similar than I originally thought,* she said in her mind. *Come to think of it, she's not much better than the demon witch. Unfortunately for me, it's either ally with her and her team, befriend the demon witch... or reconcile with father. I don't like my options here, but I don't have any choice in the matter now. I'll just have to deal with this ice wielder's sass for the duration that I'm here. Here's hoping her team doesn't take after her...*

"Powerful elemental wielders!" a crisp voice called out. "Be wary of Lord Marissa Arkana, the demon witch who shall feast upon the light of the Blood Moon!"

Neva clutched her Frost Crossbow. "Who said that?"

A wooden figure materialized before them. Adorned with a yellow and blue cloak, a blue cap with yellow lining and an orange ribbon, and shiny brown shoes, he looked more like a puppet than a cosmic being. Yet somehow, Daisy and Neva both knew that they had to take this powerful person very seriously. "A fated clash, you two will have to partake in! Lord Arkana is a mad woman with no restraints whatsoever! She will flatten Sarasaland soon, and then initiate her campaign of psychotic rage on the entire planet! But King Sarasa must be stopped as well, for the results of his own actions will be no better! Tame the beast within, or suffer for eternity!"

"Who are you?" asked Daisy. "And how do you know of all this?"

"I am the Stern Mystic," murmured the puppet-like being. "Though, you may call me, Geno. If you are wise, if you intend to liberate Sarasaland from the king, if you wish to eradicate the hellhound horde and bring the demon witch to her knees, if you desire to be your former self again, then you will listen to me."

"We've scanned the whole mansion, and she's gone!" said Gortox, the large, stocky, white and red-clothed Black Mage. He did not want to have to report such a statement to Lord Arkana, but he made it back into Marissa's throne room before the other Sweeps did.

"So she got away, and you have no idea where she went?" Marissa scorned

"I wasn't here; I don't know what she looked like!" Gortox exclaimed. "I tried to get here as fast as I could!"

"Why did you take so long to get here?" Marissa questioned. "Why are the other Sweeps still not here yet?"

Solovar burst into the room. "Lord Arkana, My Lady! There was a big, blinding flash up near the entrance of the mansion where the hellhounds all ambushed King Sarasa's daughter, but there's no

sign of her body anywhere! None of the hellhounds were even able to detect or sense her afterwards; she left no trace!"

"Again, Gortox..." Marissa growled, marching up to the white and red-clothed Sweep. "Why did it take so long for you to get here? Are you lying to me? Did you really scan the whole mansion, or are you just telling me that to cover up a failure in your course of action?"

"Hey!" Gortox yelled. "Us Black Mages have been dealing with your crap for decades now, and you can't acknowledge your own faults? Why didn't you use your Malocchio to track her when you saw her escaping? As far as I'm concerned, *you* let her get away! Of all the spells you've learned over the centuries and you couldn't cast one that would have stopped her."

Solovar began quivering. "Uh, Lord Arkana-"

Marissa put up a hand. "Yes, I most certainly heard you, Solovar, my one good Sweep."

By this time, the four remaining Sweeps had gathered just inside the doorway. They all stopped dead in their tracks the instant they sensed the bubbling tension between Marissa and their defiant partner.

"All that power in that supposed Malocchio of yours and you don't use it when you could have," Gortox griped. "Maybe I should rip it out of you and use it myself."

"Answer me, Gortox," said Marissa, the lust for blood audible in her now calm voice. "Why... did you take so long... to get here?"

In one swift motion, Marissa pulled out her Mystic Broom and impaled Gortox's head before the white and red-clothed Sweep even had a chance to answer. The other Sweeps jumped at the sight – and sound – of the crunching and splattering of flesh. Marissa laid her long, spoon-like tongue onto the shaft of her broom to lap up the blood running down the shaft. Once satisfied, she ripped her broom from out of Gortox's head and let the body fall over, after which she stomped on the dying Sweep's skull. Her movements were without hesitation.

"I don't like poor results," Marissa spat at the now dead Gortox. "And I've had enough of your mouth." The demon witch then turned to the other Sweeps. "If I needed to use my Malocchio, I would have. If you all had done what you were supposed to do, she would have been captured and would have either submitted to us or been stripped of her life."

"We apologize for our inadequacy," said Naraka, the black and silver-clothed Black Mage.

"Death is so beautiful you know," Marissa went on. "You're all lucky that you have the capacity to experience it without any hindrance. Remember that. Remember what a blessing that is."

"Yes, it is a blessing," the green and silver-clothed Black Mage known as Tamara hesitantly agreed.

"Alright; I guess that means there's only five of you Sweeps now," Marissa murmured. "I might need to enlist a substitute. Five is a poor number to have. Good thing I've got a deal lined-up with someone already!"

"You know what was wrong with Gortox was that he was playing too much basketball," said Tamara.

"I personally prefer dodgeball," stated Machula, the gold and black-clothed Black Mage.

"Hockey's better," muttered Maki, the white and silver-clothed Black Mage.

"What – will you all shut up about these meaningless sports?!" Marissa cried out. "Trying to think here! Damn, it won't be long before you're all out racing karts or competing in the Olympics, huh?"

No response came from any of the Sweeps. Their eyes were as wide open as their bodies were motionless.

Marissa shook her head. "Braindead Charlatans." She then grinned as she delved into her thoughts. *M y great beast, the most elite of the hellhounds, will be able to track the scent of that Sarasa girl and*

lead us to her! He had to have caught a whiff of her down the hallway when Solovar initially led her here. Then once we've found her, I'll lock my Malocchio onto her so that I'll have full 24/7 surveillance over her even if he somehow manages to escape again, but in the end, there's no escaping me. I am the master hunter... The demon witch's mouth drifted open, allowing deep, heavy breath to seep out."You know what, I barely get out of the house anymore. I feel like having a night out, if you know what I mean! Naraka! Tamara! You're accompanying me! The rest of you – begone! Lest my broom find the chasm in your rear end!"

"King Sarasa's Hubris is growing as the days pass," Geno said to Daisy and Neva. "With the T-29 Remodeling Devices, the Sarasaland military's most powerful elemental war machines, and his own personal elemental tools, the chainsaw-like Quake Breakers, King Sarasa is a definite force to be reckoned with."

"He has his own elemental tools?" asked Daisy. "So he's an earth wielder himself?"

"Yes," answered Geno. "Although not a very stellar one."

"I see," Daisy said. "I'm his daughter, though I never saw him perform any earth wielding before. That's why I asked."

"Why would he need to when he has an entire military?" Neva muttered. "He doesn't want to have to dirty his hands; he'll make sure that others do the work he wants done before he does it himself. Those damned Quake Breakers of his are probably nothing more than self-defense against a direct threat or assassination attempt. The T-29s are cruel weapons used to essentially leave entire landscapes in ruin, but I doubt that the king would use them on his own soil."

"Interesting," Geno murmured. "You know much, young one."

"But not enough," Neva replied. "Any extra assistance to my Sarasaland Resistance team will be well received. Myself and the other three members have our hands full having to deal with both

King Sarasa and the demon witch."

"Lord Arkana," Geno said with gruffness. "Deep in the heart of the Chai Kingdom, the hellhound horde grows in strength and number. She is a being who had been driven far beyond madness, and who now finds stability in instability. She has been here for quite sometime, her activities going relatively undetected. Unfortunately, that is not the case anymore. She has been growing her power and forces up until now and is looking to take the initiative and begin her assault."

"What exactly does she want to do?" Daisy asked. "And why am I... the way I am now? What am I even?"

"No one knows her end goal for sure," Geno answered. "But her motives are very clear to the few who know of her existence and past. As for yourself, you've taken on quite the form."

"So I'm not a human anymore?" the Kruna of Earth asked.

"Not exactly," Geno replied with a chuckle. "Your case is very difficult to explain, but we can not discuss any further at this present time. I fear that Lord Arkana could be out now looking for us at this very moment!"

"That figures," Daisy muttered.

"Gather your resistance members, ice wielder," said Geno. "Then, all of you must come find me at the base of the Muda Kingdom's mountain ranges to the Southeast of Castle Town. We shall proceed with instruction there; it is a safe haven that the hellhounds do their best to avoid!" At the conclusion of his statement, Geno dematerialized into a burst of light and evaporated.

"C'mon, Sarasa, so we can go get the resistance members!" Neva said to Daisy. "We have to go to the Birabuto Kingdom to the west of Castle Town. It's not going to be too far; it's going to be near the boundary with Castle Town, so we won't be getting out into the desert region. Just follow me!"

Chapter VII

Dead Simple :

Riding atop the monstrous, three-headed hellhound Cerberus, Marissa, Naraka, and Tamara all scouted the paths of Sarasa Field, Sarasaland Castle Town's outer boundaries. It was sometime in the early morning, but the sun was not up. The landscape was still under a dark indigo blanket, but Cerberus' tracking olfactory senses had caught a whiff of Daisy during the brief period of time the Kruna of Earth was in the Catacombs.

"I haven't taken you out for a walk in quite some time, have I?" Marissa cooed to her titanic hellhound. Cerberus was easily seven times the size of Marissa herself. Had Bowser been around, he would have been only a fifth the size of the fiendish canine.

"Why is Cerberus taking us down around Castle Town?" Tamara asked. "He's going in the direction of the Birabuto Kingdom!"

"Obviously, the Sarasa girl has gone down to the Birabuto Kingdom, duh," Marissa replied, trying to sound mockingly stupid. "Do you doubt my baby? He can smell whenever a cell of blood leaks from the microscopic tears in our skin that we as living beings are not even aware we get on a daily basis – I'm certain that he knows what he's smelling and where the scent is leading!"

"Why would she go down there though?" Tamara asked.

"Why does it matter where she goes?" Marissa snapped. "Why are you questioning it? Why can't you be a perfect little obedient slave like Naraka? If I wanted him to lick my calves, he would! No questions asked!" She turned to the black and silver-clothed Sweep. "Naraka! Lick my calves!"

Tamara started flailing his hands. "No no no, Naraka! I get it-"

Naraka knelt down and lifted up Marissa's dress, then began licking each of her calves. He showed no hesitation whatsoever while

Tamara just stared, creeped out. He wasn't surprised though, because he had come to expect bizarre, unorthodox things from Lord Arkana. As Naraka kept licking Marissa's calves, Tamara thought back and remembered the time Marissa went into Castle Town on Halloween to trick-or-treat and smacked everyone in the head who put pretzels and Mushrooms in her bucket. She had said she was trying to gather Fire Flowers for a special spell, but Tamara knew it was just an excuse for her to go into town and mess with the populace. The only reason Marissa was able to get away with it is because people thought that she was wearing a costume.

"I haven't bathed in a week!" Marissa thought aloud. "Or was it a month? I don't know; I get those two confused a lot. Anyways, I haven't had a night out in a while, so please don't try to ruin it! Besides, we'll catch up to her not long after she stops wherever she is. Cerberus is a fast-moving hound." She peered down at her legs. "That's good, Naraka. As much as I'd love for you to continue, you've proven my point. You are my favorite of the Sweeps, you know."

"That's just demeaning!" Tamara cried out. "Have you no dignity, Naraka?"

"Lord Arkana's demands always take priority above all else," Naraka replied, shrugging. He stuck his hand in his mouth to pull out a few hairs that got caught on his tongue.

Tamara rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Kiss up."

"I can have him do *much* worse," the demon witch sang. "Since you obviously still need some more examples on how to act..."

"No, Lord Arkana!" Tamara exclaimed. "That's not necessary!"

Marissa cupped her hands and started batting her eyelids. "Oh, Naraka!"

"Hey look!" Tamara screamed, pointing ahead. "What's that down on the ground?!"

Several dozen yards in front of them were the disheveled remains of

Metal Mario abandoned towards the side of the path. Neva's icicles remained intact in the metal figure.

"Heel!" Marissa commanded, bringing Cerberus to a stop. Marissa, Naraka, and Tamara dismounted the great hellhound to look over the discarded mess of metal.

"Is this linked to the Sarasa girl in any way?" Tamara wondered aloud.

"I don't know," said Naraka. "But then again, I recall having seen an animated metal form a little more than a week ago around here. Whether or not this is the same body is beyond me."

Marissa smirked. "Naraka, cast the Stealth Spell to conceal our energy signatures for the duration of the remaining darkness." The demon witch then snapped her fingers, causing a mystic book to appear in the air in front of her. Without even touching the book, she flipped through the pages to look for one of many magical skills to make use of. When she found her desired spell, she dismissed the book and made a quartet of hand signs paired with the word, "Reversion." A beam of golden light bolted from her left hand over the ruined pile of metal, pulling the pieces together and warping them back into place to recreate Metal Mario in its entirety.

Ah, the Reversion Spell, Naraka noted in his mind. *A spell that reverts inorganic objects back to a previous state. You've collected a lot of spells over the years, Lord Arkana. I hope to have my own Book of Spells like you one day, and perhaps become an even better spellcaster than you...*

"There, I fixed you," Marissa said to Metal Mario. "Now get the hell outta my face."

Metal Mario flinched as if it were surprised, and then looked around the landscape before wandering off into the distance. It looked aimless and confused in its movements, but it was soon out of sight. Tamara then turned to Marissa and asked, "Why did you do that, Lord Arkana? That's completely unlike you."

Marissa gave a coy smile. "What? I've been alive for how long now?

I can't do a little charitable thing for once?"

Daisy and Neva made good time dashing along the outer boundaries of Castle Town to get down to just inside Birabuto Kingdom territory. The transformation noticeably altered Daisy's gait. Her run imitated that of a feral beast, and now that she was walking, she was hunched over and lumbering ahead instead of making tall and upright strides. They were only a few minutes into the Birabuto Kingdom when they reached a small outpost tower covered overhead by trees and foliage.

"You think Marissa knows that we're here?" Daisy asked.

"Let's hope not," replied Neva. "It took too long for us to get here, even with us running."

Daisy suddenly gasped and reached behind her back. "My backpack! My backpack's gone!"

"What are you talking about?" Neva muttered. "You were never wearing one!"

"Yes I was!" Daisy snapped. "It was black, and I was wearing it when I met you! But then – damn! You know what; I didn't walk into Castle Town with it on! It must have ripped off of me during my tussle with Metal Mario!"

"What did you have in there?"

"Food, for one!" Daisy cried out. "Man, I'm starving! I could down a four-pound burger right about now! Oh wait, I'm a beast now... I could down an eight-pound burger right about now!"

Neva smacked herself in the face. "Anything *significant* ?"

"Well, I should've had my World Map in there too, I think. Also had two spare sets of clothes just like the ones I have on now."

"Well, you're at a loss. We can't retrace steps right now! You're just going to have to go out and look for it at a later date and hope

nobody finds it."

Daisy sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right. There's more important and immediate things to worry about. So where are the other resistance members?"

"They should be inside," replied Neva. "I don't know how long we've actually been out, but I hope I don't have to go in and wake them up. They said they wouldn't sleep until I returned-"

A koopa poked his head out from one of the windows up in the tower. "Neva? Is that you? Who's that next to you? Hold on, we're coming down!"

"Wow," Neva muttered. "All the Teeheespressos in the world would not have been able to keep me up this late if I knew that there was a bed right behind me. Anyways, you'll see that the density of the forests starts dissipating around here. Further out west is where the desert begins and where the abandoned pyramids lie."

"Abandoned?" Daisy asked. "Interesting. I don't remember them being abandoned."

"Well, it's a pretty dead place," the ice wielder answered. "That's essentially where the stone environment begins, but, then again, you used to live in Sarasaland, so I'm sure you should know the general layout of the nation."

That's right, Daisy thought. *Just because Sarasaland is an earth-dominant nation doesn't mean it's entirely an earth environment. The Birabuto Kingdom's strictly a stone environment once out in the desert. The Muda Kingdom is both a stone and water environment, but that's because it's made up of the mountain ranges that run along the southeast coastline that borders the sea. The Easton Kingdom is nothing but a collection of several dozen islands out in the ocean off the east coast, north of Muda, but south of Chai. Good to see I still remember all of this nation's core geography. As far as the expanded geography that is the consequence of my father, I have no idea...*

"Not many people would like to inhabit an area filled with Boos,

zombies, mummies, and Dry Bones all strolling around," Neva continued. "It wasn't always like that, but regardless, I'd blame it on Marissa's recent meddling. All the residents of the Birabuto Kingdom are more towards the boundary with the Castle Town district and away from the desert now."

"The more I hear about this demon witch, the more wicked she sounds," Daisy remarked as the doors at the base of the tower opened. "But that's alright – the more wicked the enemy, the more exciting the battle."

"So, Daisy," Neva began, pointing to each person as they walked out from the doors of the tower. "These are our current members; including myself, he's Darmani, an earth wielder and the one who called out to us from the window. She's Jade, a stone wielder. And he's *Elliot* , a light wielder."

There were no surprises in the appearance of any of two of the three elemental wielders just introduced. Darmani was a large koopa who looked to be in the same apparel as Daisy, except he had a more even distribution of black and silver as opposed to Daisy's almost exclusively black outfit. Jade was a typical stone wielding girl in a brown jacket, tan pants, and gunmetal gray shirt and boots. Elliot, however, looked like a classical god in his white, black, and gold ornamental attire. The sparkle in his eyes and on his teeth were visible even in the darkness of the early morning much like his glossy, flowing blonde hair. Daisy couldn't help but notice Neva's coquettish gaze fixed upon Elliot and had to suppress a laugh.

"You made it back so late!" exclaimed Jade. "We started to wonder if Marissa killed you or if you got caught by King Sarasa's police!"

"Is this a new recruit or a new pet?" asked Elliot.

"Nah, it doesn't look like a pet," said Darmani. "Rather, it looks more like a severely deformed human."

"You know, nine hours ago, I looked nothing like this," muttered Daisy.

Darmani pointed a finger in surprise. "It talks!"

"Of course she does, bonehead," said Neva. "She's just a human who's been mutated by Marissa."

"Ouch," Jade whispered. "That sucks."

Daisy raised an eyebrow when Jade didn't say anything more. "Yeah. It sure does suck." Out of politeness, she refrained from adding the extra sass that was just itching to come out of her.

"So, Daisy was it?" Darmani asked.

"Yeah," Neva answered before the Kruna of Earth could reply herself. "She's King Sarasa's daughter."

"Is she our hostage?" Elliot asked.

Neva nodded. "Yeah."

"What?!" Daisy shouted.

"Well, technically!" Neva muttered. "I did say that you either had to join us or die, so that's not too far off from being a hostage, is it not? You're just not held down and cuffed."

Daisy sucked her teeth and then grunted and shook her head. "Alright, you know what – fine. Whatever. Can we just move on?"

"I sense some impatience," Elliot murmured. Daisy just stared at the light wielder with a blank expression, holding back another snappy comeback she knew she wanted to let out.

"Darmani," said Neva. "I was just telling your fellow dirt-eater here about some of the changes that have been made in Sarasaland during her absence."

"There's definitely been some changes around here in the handful of years I've been gone," stated Daisy.

"You say 'fellow' as if she's my equal," Darmani muttered. "But I am an elite earth wielder, far more experienced and tested than she could ever be, I guarantee that! I'm named after an ancient hero, you know!"

Daisy flicked her now clawed hand at the koopa to dismiss his statement. "That's your opinion. All I'm concerned with getting done right now is taking down that witch and getting my father off the throne."

"And you probably want to change back to your normal self, right?" asked Elliot.

"Yeah," replied the Kruna of Earth with a nod.

Neva turned back to Daisy. "So returning to the subject matter, that's the whole deal with the Birabuto Kingdom here. Birabuto Kingdom's deserts are a bad place to be. Too much open space; keeping a base concealed is not possible unless built underground, and we already decided that we weren't going to go through that route. So our current spot here is the best place to set up HQ for now."

"The Easton Kingdom has quieted down, so that could be a future possibility," Jade said. "Ever since King Sarasa began expanding Sarasaland out west, people have moved inland and deserted the islands. Even though the population is now pretty low and the area has been reserved primarily for wildlife, Easton Kingdom still remains one of the prominent features of Sarasaland."

"And we should all know the deal with what's going on deep within the Chai Kingdom's Deep Wood region," Elliot added.

"And what about the territories my dad has taken over?" asked Daisy.

"Still just that," replied Elliot. "Territories. They've been annexed, but have not been formed into new kingdoms...yet, that is."

"He'll get around to it," Neva muttered. "It's what he does best."

"If you're the king's daughter, then where have you been all this time?" Elliot asked the Kruna of Earth.

"I've been over on the western continent," Daisy said. "I've done a lot of training; general, sport-specific, combat; you know."

"My parents actually came from the West," said Darmani. "I was too

young to remember much about what happened or why, but we had to move out here to the eastern side of the world to the area just west of Sarasaland."

"All of us are former outsiders of Sarasaland," Elliot said. "We're from regions that used to be neighboring sovereign countries to Sarasaland before King Sarasa moved in and took over. You can say that we wanted to get our independence back in the beginning, but we've since seen that Sarasaland itself is suffering from the king's actions and therefore decided to take the initiative ourselves to remove him from office."

"He's expanded to take up just over half of the East," Jade added. "He doesn't have any plans of stopping, and few have any intentions of intervening."

"We had a fifth member with us, but he was killed a few weeks ago," said Neva. "Anton was his name, an ice wielder like me and the most powerful person of our group when he was alive. He was an awesome friend."

"It was a shame to see him go the way he did," Darmani muttered. "Marissa Arkana restrained him and ripped his head off in front of all of us. It was our first encounter with that demon witch, and man, that image is plastered in our minds!"

Neva took a deep breath. "I don't wanna think about it, Darmani. Too depressing. Besides, we've got someone we need to meet with now that can be a valuable asset to our cause..."

Peach leaned over the balcony on the top level of her castle, staring out into the setting sun. Things had been real quiet for her and the Mushroom Kingdom for weeks. It felt like ages to her though, because her kingdom had been through so much over the years that it was hard to just slow down and accept that there was an ongoing pleasant period for her and her people.

I should not take for granted these peaceful times, she thought to herself. *It's times like these that need to be treasured. The whole*

kingdom is at rest, but yet I don't feel it myself. There's so much that needs to be done. The current state of the Mushroom Kingdom does not reflect the state of the entire world.

Princess Toadstool cupped her hands together in front of her chest, sending out a prayer. "The world is so cruel, the world is so unjust. Please, let it all end. Please, bring an end to the vile malevolence that plagues our planet. Let these peaceful times in our kingdom expand out into the world around us and extend throughout time."

A translucent image of Bowser faded into Peach's vision over the horizon. The Koopa King looked tranquil and serene. All the confined tension was gone from his face and body. He looked no more menacing than Mario or Luigi or Toad or Yoshi.

"You've taught me a lot, Bowser," Peach murmured. "I feel like I am a much better leader now than I was in the past. Actions have repercussions. Actions have consequences. Both the aggressor and the effected need to be aware of such things. I'm grateful that you had an understanding of my circumstances and why I did what I did years ago. The world could use more people like you." She paused for a brief moment. "The past me would have never said that because she was too self-absorbed, more concerned with what happened to her kingdom and what happened to herself than she was with being considerate of those outside of the Mushroom Kingdom. The Mushroom Kingdom was doing too much of all the wrong things to try and remedy its dark times, and you and your Koopa Clan got caught in our crosshairs. You sought revenge for so long, but you've managed to let it go..." The image of Bowser faded away several seconds later.

Maybe I should stop by Bowser's Palace again tomorrow, she thought. *I haven't seem him since last week, and I didn't get to finish talking to him or saying everything I wanted to say. I wonder what he and his group of friends have been up to since then.*

"So we need you all to come with us!" Neva declared. "We have to go to the base of the Muda Kingdom mountain ranges!"

"And if this Geno guy is an enemy?" Darmani asked. "Or better yet, if he's an accomplice to either the king or the demon witch?"

Neva smirked. "Even if he does turn out to be against us, we can all take him down, right Elliot?"

"I'm pretty sure I can handle anything this time," stated Elliot. "I think you guys should leave Marissa to me when next we come across her."

"With all due respect, Elliot, I need to take my shot at her," said Daisy.

Neva gasped and raised her leg to stomp down on Daisy's foot, drawing a dog-like whimper from the mutated Kruna of Earth. "You had your shot at her, Sarasa, now leave it in the hands of someone more capable! This guy is the strongest, fastest, toughest, most powerful, most agile, and smartest one we've got on the team, you hear me? He's becoming a true asset the better he gets!" With a sharp raise in her tone, she added. "Don't question him!"

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm *that* good in all those areas," Elliot replied. "I will say though that I pride myself in being an expert with a sword, spear, hammer, ax, tonfa, shuriken, recurve bow, rifle, lance, and the occasional nunchaku – which I happen to have holstered to my belt right now!"

"Interestingly enough, he seems to pick up anything and everything very fast!" Jade added.

Darmani nodded. "I have to admit; if there's anyone on the team to lean on and trust with our fates at this point, it's Elliot. This guy's a *beast.* "He paused and looked at Daisy, thinking he needed to correct himself. "Figuratively, that is."

"Really, I've achieved too many accolades for my efforts," Elliot remarked with remorse. Though he seemed at least a little humble, Daisy could tell that he was relishing all the praise. "I can't remember most of them because there's so many! That includes certificates, awards, prizes, trophies, and all the like. Most of them were unearned. I could have done better to achieve them."

"What have *you* accomplished in your time, earth-digger?" Neva asked Daisy.

"Well, I have one Striker Cup Championship title," Daisy noted.

"Oh, just one?" Elliot asked. "That's alright. You'll get your time to shine."

"Hey! I also have a couple Olympic gold medals!" the Kruna of Earth added.

Jade almost sounded like she was trying to comfort and support Daisy, saying to her, "Oh, good for you!" Darmani put two thumbs up and grinned with his mouth wide open.

"Unbelievable," Daisy muttered. "Look, I'm sorry I'm not perfect perfection! I don't feel bad because I'm not as awesome as he is, you know!"

"Good to know that you've come to terms with your mediocrity," said Neva.

Daisy started growling. *I swear, I haven't gotten a break ever since I arrived here,* she scowled in her mind.

"How about we get as much rest as we can while it's still dark and then head out to see Geno during the day?" Elliot suggested. Without any surprise, no one objected to the light wielder's statement. Daisy wanted to object and demand that they all go to Geno now, but with the way everyone was idolizing Elliot, she decided to just keep quiet out of pure annoyance.

Jade started to lead the way to the tower doors, followed by Darmani with Neva and Daisy both close behind. Elliot took one step forward, and then none more. Everyone turned around to see what caused the light wielder to let loose a painful, disgruntled shriek. At that moment, a long, brown metal pole stabbed through Elliot's chest from behind him. No one was able to pick up on any hostile energy signatures, so all were in shock when Elliot stumbled forward several steps to reveal Marissa Arkana standing right behind him. The demon witch yanked on her broom to pull it free from the light

wielder's body, causing him to let out an agonizing scream. Marissa was grinning, her fangs visible and flaring. From behind the demon witch came Naraka and Tamara riding atop the monstrous Cerberus. The fiendish dog's hot breath was clearly discernible in the darkness. No one else dared move.

"How..." Neva whimpered. "MARISSA!"

"We've never seen THAT before!" Jade cried out, pointing at Cerberus.

"Hey man!" Darmani called out at Elliot, the light wielder struggling to stand up. "Turn around! Say something!"

"For what?" Marissa asked. "He's dead. Get over it. You bunch of babies."

"I'm...not...dead yet..." Elliot grunted out before finally collapsing onto the ground. He was motionless the moment he fell, and remained on the ground.

"I'm not dead yet," Marissa nasally repeated. "Last words spoken by Mr. Perfect. Yeah, my Sweeps and I heard his bragging and gloating, but apparently, we're the only ones who did."

Like a flash of lightning, Neva pulled out her Frost Crossbow and shot two large ice arrows at the demon witch. They punctured and stabbed into her upper chest much like the witch's broom went through Elliot, but didn't accomplish much else. Marissa simply stripped out the ice arrows and crushed them in her free hand.

"You call that an attack?" Marissa taunted. "Dear lord – get it together." She turned to Daisy, who looked like she was trying to manipulate the ground around them in some kind of way. The Kruna of Earth was having obvious difficulty trying to do anything with her element. When she finally got some control, all she could muster was a floating, clunky mound of mud, clay, and soil. Marissa watched Daisy's struggles with squinted eyes and conceitedness. "Having problems, Sarasa?"

Daisy didn't answer verbally, instead opting to hurl the mass at Lord

Arkana right away. Marissa shot a bolt of power from her broom to blast apart the earthen heap with minimal effort. Disappointment and confusion continued easing their way into Daisy's psyche.

"So I am the better earth wielder!" Darmani proclaimed.

"This transformation's been a real pain!" Daisy grunted. "Damn, I never thought I'd say this, but I hate my body!"

"Aw, sweetie," Marissa began as she floated into the air. "You just gotta accept who you are!" She drifted backwards towards Cerberus and perched herself on top of the monstrous creature, joining her two Sweeps.

I can't go into Nova Form, and my control over earth is limited, Daisy mused. *How do I fight in this bestial shape? I'm vulnerable...*

"Hey koopa!" Marissa called out at Darmani. "Where'd you get that shirt of yours?"

Darmani pulled on his cloth. "Uh...let me think-"

"Just kidding!" Marissa cackled. "I don't care." She poked the bristles of her broom into Cerberus' skin. The great hellhound charged up a devastating sphere of energy through each of his heads and fired the three orbs of power at the tower. The elemental wielders all dove forward and away from the tower as the blasts rocketed through the air, blowing the construct and its surrounding trees into oblivion.

"No!" Jade shouted. "Why the tower?!"

"Nice devastating monster," Marissa cooed, stroking Cerberus' back. "That's a good nightmarish creature. Who's my favorite harbinger of destruction? You are! Yes you are!"

"First you kill Elliot, then you ruin our base," Neva snarled, her volume increasing with each word. "No more from you, you damn witch! Jade; let it loose!"

Jade pulled out the massive hammer she had strapped across her back and dashed forward at Cerberus. Daisy followed, flanked by Neva with her Frost Bayonet readied on her crossbow and Darmani

with two mounds of earth trailing him. In a simultaneous offensive, Jade slammed her hammer into one of Cerberus' legs, Neva slashed at another of Cerberus' legs, and Darmani slammed the two heaps of earth into one of Cerberus' heads. Daisy put together what was supposed to be her high-speed Crystal Kick that instead ended up being a collection of shards and soil suspended around her foot and landed a hit on the same leg Neva slashed at. The attacks angered the great hellhound, who charged more spheres of power from his mouth to blast at the elemental wielders. This time, one head of the hellhound created a spheroid of fire, the other made one of ice, and the final head made one of gusting, shredding winds. The hellhound released the blasts, prompting the elemental wielders to evade and cut out of the way. Neva countered the fire blast with a stream of snow from her Frost Bayonet while the other two blasts hit the ground. Cerberus then leapt high into the air and slammed his legs onto the ground, creating a massive shockwave that knocked all the elemental wielders off of their feet. With the momentary cease in action, Cereberus lumbered over to Elliot's dead body and scooped the light wielder's entire corpse up into one of his heads. The elemental wielders returned to their feet with the sound of crunching bones in their ears.

"Hey!" Marissa screamed at her hellhound. "What do you think you're doing? You know I like the thighs!" Cerberus took a couple more chews with its full mouth and swallowed, inciting frustration from Lord Arkana. "Why didn't you save me a thigh?!" she hollered, flailing her arms.

Jade's mouth was agape after witnessing Cerberus devour and swallow Elliot's body. "Okay... I did not need to see that. Not at all..."

Neva took aim with her crossbow and fired an ice arrow at Marissa's head, but Cerberus' shift in posture angled the demon witch just out of the way. Off into the distance went the arrow, having came closer to striking Tamara than Marissa.

"Hey! You almost took off my head with that!" Tamara screamed.

"No one should wish to antagonize me when I've just been denied a meal," Marissa snarled. "Cerberus!"

The monstrous hellhound howled into the sky. Three large prisms of lightning appeared high overhead and began rotating around the battlefield. Energy crackled, and within seconds, bolts of electricity bolted down to the ground. Neva, Daisy, and Darmani all slipped to the sides of the columns of lightning as they struck, but Jade was not so lucky. The stone wielder got caught and was zapped for several seconds on end before the lightning prisms ceased their fire and dissipated. Charred and burnt, Jade was still alive... but only barely.

"Damn it!" Marissa shouted. "If you're going to cook the meat, don't burn it! Bad dog! Naughty, naughty boy!" The demon witch proceeded to wag her finger at her frowning and whimpering hellhound.

Jade staggered around in haphazard fashion, too dazed and confused to make out anything. Seeing the vulnerable stone wielder wide open to attack, Daisy, Neva, and Darmani all rushed in front of Jade to defend her.

"Oh please!" Tamara shouted. He and Naraka both stood up on top of Cerberus' back to fire off two bolts of erratic energy. Daisy and Darmani combined their efforts to raise a wall of earth up from the ground, the Kruna of Earth's handicapped elemental capacities this time offset by working in conjunction with another earth wielder. Upon contacting the barrier, the blasts created an explosion that pushed back and scattered the elemental wielders. Unable to defend herself, Jade was left vulnerable to a finishing blow. Through the residual haze and dust, Cerberus dashed to the stone wielder and threw two slashes at her with his claws. Her severely debuffed body could not handle the ripping from Cerberus. By the time Cerberus leapt back and away, Jade was no more.

"Rest in pieces," Marissa murmured, waving her hand.

"You're gonna pay for the tower, and you're gonna definitely pay for Elliot and Jade!" Darmani howled. The koopa pulled out two bunches of bob-ombs – four to each hand – and got set to hurl them. Neva shot a round of four ice arrows from her crossbow at Cerberus' feet, pinning the hellound's two front limbs to the ground.

"Whoa, we gotta move!" Tamara yelled to Naraka. The two Sweeps disembarked from Cerberus' back, but Marissa oddly decided to stay atop the great hellhound. Lord Arkana watched as eight bob-bombs soared through the air and made contact with Cerberus. Unable to move, Cerberus could do nothing to save himself from the highly volatile explosives.

Bright colors lit up the sky, and clouds of smoke and ash billowed from the site of impact. Daisy, Neva, and Darmani all put up their guards to minimize any collateral damage from the massive eruption of gaseous flames and combustion. Darmani was impulsive and chucked the bob-bombs when they were just inside the radius of the explosives' range. Tamara and Naraka were behind where Cerberus was and were kept out of range and safe. By the time the atmosphere settled, a mottled and gory corpse of half of Cerberus remained, while the other half was pulverized and liquefied. Marissa did get caught up in the blast, but the battlefield had cleared to reveal that she had a shielding outline around her body. Reveling in the looks of indignation and furious disappointment plastered on the elemental wielders' faces, the demon witch started chuckling a wicked chuckle that escalated into laughter and finally strengthened further into maniacal cackling.

"Why are you laughing?!" Daisy shouted. "Can't you see what just happened to your beloved pet?"

Marissa's laughing transitioned into a sly, devilish grin. "I could have easily saved Cerberus with one of my spells; I could have saved him just as I saved myself. You gave me enough time to react, but he was too weak for my tastes as he was."

Darmani's eyes went wide. "You intentionally let him get wasted like that? But why? Because he wasn't as powerful as you wanted? That's beyond cold. You're just a sociopath!"

"I prefer the term, 'unique,' koopa," Marissa said with the most fiendish arrogance Daisy ever heard. "Cerberus can not be defeated, just as I can not be defeated."

"What are you saying?" Neva demanded.

"Fools," Marissa snarled. "Cerberus is birth, Cerberus is life, Cerberus is death. You destroy him now, he will be revived at a later date more powerful than before. All you did was delay your fates as his meal." She paused, putting up a hand across her chest with two fingers up. "But then again, who said I was gonna let you live long enough to be eaten?"

A quick flash occurred in the irises of the demon witch. Her bangs underneath her hat parted down the middle to fully expose her fleur-de-lis marking on her forehead. The X-marking on her forehead fleur-de-lis horizontally split, easing open to reveal a slightly larger third eye. Daisy wasn't sure of it, but there was something particularly malevolent about Marissa's now revealed eye, a kind of vile malevolence that she was able to sense and feel on a level beyond the physical realm.

"The Malocchio," Darmani murmured. "The Malocchio Eye..."

"Only I have the eyes to oversee Sarasaland," Marissa taunted, charging energy through her Mystic Broom. With a slash from her broom, a bolt of energy flew free from the bristles and struck the ground directly in front of Darmani. The blast sent the koopa airborne and rocketing far away. Darmani was still soaring when he flew off into the distance and out of sight.

"Darmani!" Neva screamed.

"My aim with three eyes is a little rusty," muttered the demon witch. At the snap of her fingers, Tamara and Naraka ran over to stand to either side of Lord Arkana. "I don't like to use such an energy-expensive ability in combat, but it doesn't matter. I love instilling fear almost as much as anger and distaste. If he's smart, he won't make his way back here."

Four ice arrows formed on Neva's Crossbow. "If you're smart, you won't move and you'll let me fire off as many arrows as it takes to render you and your two Sweeps an equal or greater mess than your overgrown, 'roided-out dog!" She aimed her elemental tool directly at the demon witch.

"Comical," Tamara snided. "But then again, isn't she the one that did

away with Kenn and Cephas?"

"She is," said Naraka. "To me, it seems that this little ice wielder is a far more significant threat to us than that Sarasa girl."

Marissa began laughing once again. "I find it funny that the Sarasa girl has been mostly ineffective for the duration of our conflict! What's wrong? You're not taking the Betedaimon venom well? I wonder if using it on your father would invoke a similar effect!"

Furious and loathing of her new body, Daisy could not come up with any kind of response to the demon witch. The Kruna of Earth was entirely outmatched and accomplished next to nothing in this battle. Self-hatred bubbled and churned within her with the awareness of what transpired and what she was unable to do. Two people were stripped of their lives in front of her and another was blasted out of the area; all she perceived to be preventable had she not failed to respond. *But what can I do in my current state? s* he wondered. *I'm not at all used to this form and I can barely manage to wield the earth! Is the earth betraying me now? Why is it resisting me – or am I resisting it? Or maybe the earth's just not accepting me and my tainted self anymore!* She gazed down at her hands and started to quiver with rage. *What's going on?! What's wrong with me?!*

"A pitiable being," Lord Arkana cooed. "Too bad I don't believe in pity..." Her Malocchio eye produced a shining glare even in the darkness of the early morning hours.

Feeling ever so helpless, powerless, confused, and even more furious than ever before, the bestial Kruna of Earth emitted a harsh, grating growl from deep within the soul far more savage than most of the other wildlife inhabiting Sarasaland. The animalistic behavior managed to incite fear within Neva, who looked back at her remaining partner and wondered if she better aim her arrows at the raging beast near her.

"That's just what an animal would do," Marissa said in between chuckles. "Once there's no escape, the feral beast cries out to the heavens through an enraged outburst in the hopes of freeing itself from its dangers, but to no avail, for you see, I am the ultimate hunter. I am superior to Fawful, I am superior to Dimentio, I am

superior to Osiris, and yes, soon I will be superior to even the Shadow Queen herself!"

Neva peered back at Marissa. "You're a madman – I mean, woman!"

"You're damn skippy!" the demon witch replied. "And I'd make a much better overlord than King Sarasa! I'm adorabubble!"

"Daisy..." murmured Neva. "Is that you in there?"

Daisy was hunched forward on all fours, almost to the point of imitating Donkey Kong. Profuse trembling dominated her body, a certain calling trying to overtake her. But she retained control of herself and didn't give in to that invasive, primal urge that would have likely lashed out at Marissa and Neva both.

"Daisy..." Neva repeated.

"...I'm fine," the Kruna of Earth grunted out.

"Not for long," Marissa said in a near whisper. "Now feel the wrath of my Malocchio Eye. Allow me to work you two to the brink of insanity...and beyond..."

Marissa was ready to exploit one of the Malocchio Eye's abilities, but did not activate her eye fast enough. A beam of light shot down from the air, serving as the vessel upon which a figure touched down to the ground in front of Daisy and Neva. As the light evaporated, the earth and ice wielders both recognized the newcomer as Geno. The cosmic being's arrival drew a scowling bout of anger upon Marissa's expression and caused Tamara and Naraka both to take a couple cautious steps backwards.

"Stay behind me, you two," Geno said to Daisy and Neva. "I will take over from here."

"You..." Lord Arkana hissed at the newcomer.

Chapter VIII

Unrest Through the Night :

"Stop stuffing your stupid schnoz in my business, puppet!" Marissa hollered.

Geno let light energies crackle around his left fist. "Leave these two for now." He couldn't help but notice Marissa's Malocchio Eye was active, invoking feelings of dread within him.

Lord Arkana gasped. "Why? Explain why! Why can't I take care of them now?"

"What does it matter?" Geno replied with a smile. "What is time to you? I didn't say to leave these two alone for good. I said to leave your conflict with them for a later date."

Marissa cocked her head and started tapping her face with her finger. "Well now that you put it that way, that's a more adherable demand. BUT, I don't take demands. I give them. I take pleasure in giving them. Loads of it. In fact, if I were a male, dominating and controlling anything living would make it most difficult to tell that I am wearing the relatively loose dress I am in now, especially considering my commando status."

"Oh dear lord..." Tamara muttered. Neva immediately was forced to suppress an upchuck upon hearing Marissa's statement.

"Man, you guys are so immature," said the grinning demon witch.

"And you're as deranged as you are psychopathic!" Daisy called out.

"Thank you; you're all too kind," the demon witch replied, winking. "Seriously. You're all far too kind. Anyways, Naraka! Tamara! Let's get out of here and return to the lair! I don't need to be soiling my hands dealing with Geno. I've got King Sarasa to keep tabs on." She narrowed her eyes at Daisy and Neva. "You two better watch it. You're off the hook for now, but the next time I see you, you won't be

so fortunate."

"They're sticking with me," Geno declared.

"Eventually, that's not going to matter, now is it?" Naraka replied.

"We shall see," responded Geno.

Marissa took out some dust from one of her pockets. "We shall see indeed. I sure as hell will see if nothing else." She threw the dust at the ground, creating several voluminous, colorful clouds. The clouds took a few moments to dissipate, but Marissa and her two Sweeps were nowhere to be seen once visibility was restored to the area.

"What went on here?" Geno demanded to know. "I thought you were going to get your resistance members!"

"I was, and I did!" Neva shot back. "We got here, got set to go, and then the neurotic witch ambushes us with two of her Sweeps and her overgrown hellhound! The whole team's been demolished, so now it's just me and the mud-crawler here!"

"I apologize..." Geno murmured. "I should have been aware. I didn't believe that she would have been able to track you down, at least not so quickly, that is."

"Acceptable loses," muttered Neva. "We just have to carry on without them."

"Aren't you at least a little distraught that your resistance group has been decimated?" Daisy asked.

"Hey, shouldn't you be in a cave?" Neva snapped.

"Shouldn't you be on an iceberg?" Daisy snapped back.

"Watch it, earth-digger," Neva growled. "Don't tell me how to feel!"

"Hey, ice-carver!" Daisy called out. "I thought you would at least care that the members of your resistance are all gone!"

"Why?" Neva replied. "It's obviously their own fault that they failed."

"Then why are you so willing to accept help against Marissa and my dad?" asked the Kruna of Earth.

"The help is welcome," the ice wielder answered. "But I will not surprised at all if the help fails. If I myself end up dying, it's my own damn fault for not being able to survive."

"I see that Lord Arkana had her Malocchio out," stated Geno, diverging from the quarrel. "It's never a good thing when she decides to put her Malocchio to use."

"Okay – what's so significant about is this 'Malocchio' I keep hearing about?" Daisy asked.

"So you have yet to witness any of the Malocchio's abilities, Sarasa?" asked Geno. "That's a good thing; a very good thing."

"Marissa was about to make use of it before you showed up," mentioned Neva.

Geno nodded, then began explaining Marissa's special trait Daisy. "The Malocchio is a legendary ocular evolution – it is a type of third eye, and a very advanced one at that. It's a very mysterious eye, and its abilities seem to be partially dependent on the individual user. However, Malocchio Eyes are extraordinarily rare. Less than a dozen beings throughout history had one. Marissa was not one of these beings. Instead, she grew and developed a third eye in the center of her forehead through intense meditation and a forbidden ritual. This third eye of hers was not a Malocchio though."

"Then how does she have a Malocchio Eye now?" Daisy asked.

"Through recklessness," Geno answered. "Some have rumored that she stole the Malocchio Eye she has now – that her third eye is actually a regenerated eye from the Shadow Queen. This, though, is both true and false. What actually happened – and this is from ages ago, I might add – was that she traveled to the Palace of Shadows to steal the life force of the sealed away Shadow Queen, and then channeled it into her third eye to cause it to evolve into a precursor form."

Shadow Queen? Daisy wondered. *Who's the Shadow Queen? Wait, Marissa did mention her moments ago. She must have been significant enough to warrant being sealed away and for Marissa to want to steal a portion of her life force...*

"Over time and through further empowerment and enchantment, her mystical eye developed into her present-day Malocchio Eye," Geno further explained. "The extent of its abilities is unknown. However, since the Remote Viewing of her Malocchio not only offers sight of distant areas but also of any associated sounds, you have to wonder not only about the power of that eye but also of its biological makeup." He paused, glancing around the environment before continuing. "It could very well be possible that Marissa knows where we are as we speak and will know where we are once we leave here. She could be watching and listening to us right now through the view of her Malocchio Eye, even though she just left the area."

"Are you sure she's gone?" Daisy asked.

"Yeah, I don't sense her presence anymore," replied Neva.

"So? We didn't sense her when she first appeared!" remarked Daisy. "It was only moments after she and her Sweeps got here that we were able to sense their energy signatures. Why didn't we sense her coming before then?"

"Marissa is not only a powerful demon, but a potent and knowledgeable – albeit devious – spellcaster as well," said Geno. "She has numerous spells committed to memory, and countless more recorded within her Book of Spells. I believe she has a Stealth Spell that conceals the energy signatures of her and her accomplices."

Daisy frowned, her tone growing agitated. "So we're up against an insane three-eyed demon witch with a band of underlings and a hellhound horde on one side, and the megalomaniac tyrant earth wielder that is my father with super advanced elemental war weapons and a whole town of misguided puppet followers on the other side?"

"Yes," Geno replied as-a-matter-of-factly. "Although both King

Sarasa and Marissa are major enemies that must be stopped, Marissa takes priority over the king. The king is not actively pursuing you as of late, but Lord Arkana is a stalker, a hunter, and a killer who does not even think once before slaying her prey. But so long as you two don't stray too far from me at any given point for too long, Marissa will not attempt a confrontation against us."

Skeptical, Neva asked, "Why not?"

"You saw how swiftly she left when I arrived," Geno began. "She is a formidably powerful being, but so am I. She will not try to engage in battle with me, not at the present moment, at least."

"So you're more powerful than she is?" asked Daisy. "Then why haven't you defeated her yet?"

Geno lowered his tone of voice. "If I could defeat her, I would have confronted her when I set the distraction for you to escape from Lord Arkana's mansion, Sarasa."

"So that was you that caused that bright light!" Daisy determined.

Geno nodded. "I go back to what I just said – Marissa's defeat takes priority over King Sarasa's defeat, because the time limit on Marissa is considerably more constrained. We only have three weeks – or twenty-two nights, to be exact – of a window in which to take down Lord Arkana, after which the Blood Moon will rise."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Neva asked.

"The twenty-second night from now will bring a total lunar eclipse," explained Geno. "The eclipse will turn the moon a sickly red hue, hence the term, 'Blood Moon.' Past occurrences of Blood Moons have boosted Marissa Arkana's power over the ages. She seems to be able to harness power from the moon's rays. Spellcasters have a practice of 'drawing down the moon' during a Full Moon to empower themselves with the divine lunar light shining down on them. Marissa does something very similar, except in a critically more substantial way by drawing down the light from the Blood Moon."

Neva tilted her head to the side. "How does that work? This is all so

fantastical! I mean, drawing power from the moon?!"

"You could say that the Blood Moon is an embodiment of the Earth's wickedness," Geno continued to elaborate. "The lunar light of the Full Moon is amplified by the sun, but during a Lunar Eclipse, the light of the Blood Moon is tainted by the Earth. Our planet's cruelty and collective evil create a form of negative energy that is reflected onto the Blood Moon and that is consequently able to be absorbed by Marissa. So as the planet has succumbed more and more to evil forces, the power boosts Marissa has been receiving by each Blood Moon have become evermore stronger. You'll have to defeat Marissa before this next Blood Moon rises. Otherwise, you're going to be in for quite a night, to say the absolute least. I will not be able to resist her any longer once that night comes and she absorbs that next boost in power."

"Wow," murmured Daisy. "I didn't think the moon could have had such significance."

"Oh yes," replied Geno. "The moon here has many effects on the planet, not limited to the gravitational pull, tides and increase in seismic activity! In fact, the time of day has a small but not too hard to notice effect on elemental wielders. Throughout the hours of the day, the dominance of the moon aids the control of wielders of water, earth, ice, and shadow, whereas the dominance of the sun assists wielders of fire, air, stone, and light. It's a less direct influence on elemental wielders than the immediate environment, so it is less often talked about, but it is very much a factor! Really, the Great Beings have done well to balance out the powers of the eight elements!"

"I'm curious," Neva muttered, squinting. "How do you know all of this? I'm starting to think that you're setting us up for something..."

Geno answered without hesitation, "Setting us all up for victory, yes. Worry not about how much I know. Worry not about how I know." He gestured with his hands off to the east. "Come. We've used enough time here. Daylight will break in less than two hours, and you will need all the sleep you can get. I shall lead you all to my sanctuary at the base of the Muda Kingdom's mountain ranges."

Ramona was the only one sleeping peacefully in Marut's house.

Warra could not sleep. Bowser could not sleep. Andrew could not sleep. Marut himself could not sleep. Besides the Kruna of Light, there was a lot of tossing and turning going on throughout the house. However, not everyone was in bed. Andrew was up, wide awake, a beaming look of vibrant malaise evident. He was leaning up against one of the walls in the kitchen looking over his twin forearm machetes, the former elemental tools of the deceased Kruna of Ice.

"I'm not worthy of wielding these, am I..." the Kruna of Shadow murmured, clutching the machetes as if they were canes. "I'm not worthy of being a part of this team, am I?" That gash he suffered on his left arm from the final battle in the Twelfth Dimension was healing, but still needed more time for recovery. His eyes shifted down to peer at the laceration that was all but certain to scar. *I have too many scars,* he thought, letting his eyelids drift closed. *Way too many...*

"What are you doing up?" a voice grumbled.

"Feeling," Andrew replied, not opening his eyes to see Bowser standing in the living room, rubbing his own orbs. "I would say thinking, but that seems like something better suited for you and Athelstan. What are *you* even doing up?"

"Well, for a nation that's made up mostly of clouds, I'm finding it hard to get some rest," the Koopa King answered. "So I came to get some water – and not go roaming around outside."

Andrew smirked, replacing his blades across his back. "Outside it is."

Nimbus Land looked like a ghost town at night. Bowser and Andrew walked through darkened streets, passing by residences with their lights off and businesses all closed down. Maybe one or two Nimbi were outside in total, but that was it. They both attributed it to the fact that it must have been three hours or so past midnight.

"This is the best time to be out," said Andrew. "Everyone else is asleep, so you can get a chance to enjoy the tranquil serenity of the night. I wish I didn't have to sleep, just so I can be out here at this time. It's even better on the surface. You should take notice of the way the plantlife and animals tend to kinda 'glow' even though the environment's in darkness."

"It's kinda like a reversion," Bowser added. "It's as if during the night, the world goes back in time to an era well before modernization."

"Exactly," stated the Kruna of Shadow. "Back to a simpler time, when there wasn't so much trouble in the world. And then the sun comes up and reality fast-forwards back to the present day...or whatever you want to call the time that we are currently experiencing. I'm not one to be particular."

"Time," Bowser mumbled. "It's an interesting thing. How quickly it slips by. The moment we acknowledge the present, it has already become the past. So would I be able to get away with saying that time is relative?"

"I think so," Andrew replied. "I remember about a decade or so ago when I was nine, all the kids around me seemed to love that Mini-Mario toy series, but not me. There was something else I loved that almost as popular where you took a bunch of big and small plastic and metal pieces and put them together to make a custom action figure, and you color-coded them to represent the element they would have, but until I became a shadow wielder, I didn't realize how much of a microcosm it was on our world! Then again, if I knew as a kid that I was going to be a shadow wielder, then I would have began training as early as I could, with as consistent of a work ethic as possible. I would've picked up the weights at nine, would have meddled with shadows even earlier than that, and I would have had so much more time to hone my technique and craft so that I could have been better than I am now!"

"Shoulda, woulda, coulda," said Bowser. "What's done is done. We can both sit here and exchange thoughts on what we could have done better or differently or what we could have avoided or not done, but in the end, the past is set in stone, and that's all there is to it. Not to sound like someone pessimistic or apathetic, but-"

"Of course; I get it," responded Andrew. "But at the same time, I can't help it. I still feel mediocre. I should be better, I need to be better."

"We all need to be better. That doesn't mean we have to be perfect, though."

"But if I was better, then perhaps we could have powered through the elemental shrines and the Twelfth Dimension without losing Grekka. We could have saved him. *I* could have saved him. Maybe it would've been better in the end if I was the one you all had to face."

"Nothing was going to stop that Master Pendant from taking over *somebody* and doing what it did," stated Bowser, shaking his head. "It could have latched onto any of us; Daisy, Warra, myself, Ramona-"

Andrew perked up in disbelief. "No way, not Ramona! Not a chance! I can't even imagine something like that! She's like the sweetest one here by far!" With a little bit of a quieter volume, he added. "All I'm saying is that Master Pendant really should have went for me. Grekka should still be here."

"And what makes you say that? I could very well say the same thing about myself."

Andrew shrugged. "It would take more time to explain than you would care for."

"Even if that is the case, don't dwell on it."

It took a few seconds for Andrew to respond with, "I can't help it."

Bowser sighed. "You know, if Rosalina was here, she would have said something along the lines of, 'everything happens for a reason,' or some similar phrase of that nature."

"A witty saying proves nothing if you're not prepared to back it up."

"She would've backed it up by attributing events to, 'fate,' and, 'destiny,' and, 'stars.' I feel pretty silly myself talking about this. Me in the past would have dismissed such things without a second

thought, but now, not so much."

Andrew didn't say anything more. His expression was blank. The Kruna of Fire could tell that his shadow teammate was deep within himself. It seemed to be a look that he noticed often, not just from Andrew, but from several others as well. *It seems like this whole team of Kruna has been plagued with personal troubles* , Bowser thought. *Ramona and Athelstan may be the only ones that aren't...haunted, but then again, everyone has their crap that they have to deal with. Daisy, Grekka, Elkon, Warra, Marut, Andrew, Peach, myself; it seems like a requirement. It seems like living requires us all to go through trials and tribulations. Our problems and issues are the price we pay for life. The only differences are that what we each must deal with is individualized. No one gets away free, and even if they do, I'll bet it catches up to them at some point. And still, one can only wonder how many people are forced to press on through the adversity alone, and how many force themselves to traverse through difficulties because they perceive themselves to be alone...*

"I believe I recall Toad saying that he wanted us to stop by his armory, correct?" asked Andrew.

Bowser nodded. "We can stop by tomorrow when we return to the surface. We only have a handful of hours before morning, you know. We should get back to the house and at least try to get some more sleep before we head back down."

Just a couple hours after the sun rose over Sarasaland, King Sarasa summoned Vastus into his throne room to instruct the police commissioner to execute classified orders. The King made sure that no one else was present when Vastus arrived. He did not want anyone questioning or intervening with the special request he had for his police commissioner to carry out. The moment Vastus stepped in, he noticed the angst and umbrage in the king's face. He knew then and there that he had to be very careful with his speech at that moment, because it's never a good thing to be around the king when he is in a bad mood.

"Close the doors behind you, Vastus," King Sarasa murmured with the darkest bass he could manage. "Lock them. I don't want anyone walking in."

Vastus did as the king ordered, closing the doors behind him and bolting them shut with the locking plank. If there was every an opportunity to come up with an excuse to leave, it was not in play anymore.

"Step forward," the king grumbled.

The police commissioner took a few dozen steps until he was a handful of yards away from the king. "Yes, my lord."

"You know what happened yesterday evening, correct, police commissioner?"

"In regards to the interruption of your address at Sarasaland State University?"

King Sarasa nodded very slowly, his eyes looking hazy as he did so. "That was indeed my daughter there. She returned to cause a stir, to cause unrest. We can't have that. *I* can't have that."

"So what do you intend to do, sir?"

"I would like to say that the most she'll be able to do is humor me," stated King Sarasa. "She was useless as a child, but I have not a clue as to what she is like now. If the outcomes of yesterday's events were any indication, she's still useless."

"You don't think she'll cause us any serious trouble then?" asked Vastus.

"I do not," the king answered. "HOWEVER...she is still an aggressor, an instigator. She can not be trusted. She refused and failed the title of 'Princess of Sarasaland.' She is an enemy of our nation and a rebellious little brat dabbling in treason and walking a fine line she need not walk upon, which is why I am instilling a restraining order upon Daisy Sarasa, effective immediately. She is prohibited from entering Sarasaland Castle Town. If she is found anywhere near the Central Castle, she is in direct violation and is subject to capture and

imprisonment."

Vastus nodded. "And what do you want to do about the Chai Kingdom?"

King Sarasa propped his hands on his knees and leaned forward. "...What was that..."

"The...Chai Kingdom..." said Vastus, stuttering and sputtering with nervousness. "There's still that issue; the increasing disappearances of the citizens, you know?"

"If it's such an issue, then what's stopping *you* from taking a squadron out there and settling it?"

Vastus gave no response. He had opened his mouth to say something, but stopped.

"That's what I thought," King Sarasa spat. "Think of it this way, Vastus, if you are so concerned; the less the population, the less money that must be spent keeping them alive, and the more funds and resources we have available to power my military might so that we can further expand Sarasaland's dominion."

"Forgive me, king, but are you sure this is the right way to go about things?"

"I beg your pardon," King Sarasa said, smirking. "You have too many boundaries. You don't need boundaries when you have these two words; 'limitless ambition.' You will learn, Vastus. You will have to, because if I am unable to attain a successor to my throne... Listen; as it stands now, I won't be able to keep up with this forever. In the future, I will be too old to continue my current work – unless of course, science paves the way for lasting longevity. I was hoping my daughter would have shown her father some love and respect by carrying on my will and legacy, but she refuses to cease her defiance. Pity it had to be this way."

"So your daughter stands against you now," said Vastus. "But what if you're underestimating her? What if we can't defend against her and you yourself end up confronting her face to face?"

"She is a threat to what I wish to accomplish," the king answered. "I thought she was gone for good, but she came back and wants to oppose me. I did not have this in mind when I wanted a child. I envisioned a loyal, obedient image of myself, but she has turned out to be something other. She's a full grown adult, so if it suits her to challenge her father, then so be it. If she is so adamant about destroying my legacy, then she will just have to die."

Daisy, Neva, and Geno traversed to a spacious plateau at the base of the Muda Kingdom's mountain ranges through much of the morning hours. With the morning sun rising higher into the sky, Geno lead them through a secret tunnel that took them directly underneath one of the mountain ranges. The opening on the other side of the tunnel opened up into an enchanted valley.

"This is where I reside," said Geno, gesturing around the area. "This is my home."

"Here?" asked Daisy. "Your home is here?" Even with the sun shining overhead, the valley looked ethereal with its copious mist and haze that thickened as the elevation increased. The mountain tops themselves were concealed by the silvery blur. The environment seemed like a timeless, peaceful region with a mystic aura. Something about that aura felt like a barrier to her, as if it worked to block or neutralize something. The Kruna of Earth's eyesight caught a small house built on the other side of the very passable river that ran the length of the valley.

"Yes," Geno replied. "It was a self-imposed exile that I accepted centuries ago that has now become my sanctuary. It is in my time here that I have been able to keep an eye on both the demon witch's workings and the relatively recent stir that King Sarasa has created in the past several years." He turned to his left and pointed up the valley. "There is a canyon far off into the distance. It is further north on the seaside of the mountain chains; where we would be if we continued heading in the direction furthest from Castle Town. That is a prime example of the magnitude of the T-29 Remodeling Devices. You will not be able to understand the true breadth of its terror unless you ascend to the higher levels of the mountains and look

down into the canyon itself. In some of the deepest of its trenches and ravines, light can not even penetrate all the way down. It's a wonder if the king actually managed to cut through to the mantle..."

"He's not only messing with the political map but the geographical map as well!" exclaimed Neva. "What do you think, Daisy? I'd like to shove my bayonet up his-" She peered at the Kruna of Earth to see that she was busy gazing at a cherry blossom tree.

Daisy looked back at Neva "I'm sorry, what were you saying? I wasn't paying attention."

"Obviously, you weren't," said the ice wielder. "I'm sorry I interrupted you, flower-plucker."

"Flower-plucker?!" Daisy shouted.

Neva threw her hands up. "I wanted to say something else but I don't now who's listening to us!"

"That's disgusting!" Daisy yelled.

"I'll bet it is," Neva replied with a grin.

"When you two are quite finished, you should get some rest," said Geno. "You can jump across the river and make yourselves at home in the house over there. Get as much sleep as you can, for we have a lot we must attend to, and only so much time to tend to it."

From the gardens of the Comet Observatory, Rosalina looked down on Earth, sensing and surveying the events and occurrences taking place on the planet's surface. She was emotionless – even more than usual – and brooding in her stature. Lubba came from inside the observatory to join her, although he was delicate with his words when he noticed his superior deep in thought.

"You're taking Athelstan back in a little while, correct?" Lubba asked.

"Yes, I am," Rosalina answered, not breaking her gaze on the planet. She said nothing more.

Lubba didn't want to disturb her anymore than he possibly already had, but he had another question for her, one significantly more weighted. After a few moments, he decided to ask, "Have you been watching Sarasaland?"

Rosalina took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Yes, I have."

Chapter IX

Destiny's Next Chapter :

A portal appeared in the courtyard of Bowser's Palace underneath the densely clouded mid-morning sky. From the portal, Bowser, Warra, Marut, Ramona, and Andrew emerged to see that Athelstan and Rosalina were waiting for them. Ramona and Andrew concentrated together to dispel the portal from which they came.

"How did you get back here so quickly?" asked Bowser.

Athelstan started rubbing the back of his head. "Uhh... How did Mario get to and from the Comet Observatory again? Shouldn't have to explain that! We must have been here for almost a half hour or so – I should be asking you guys where you all went!"

"Right, whatever, it's a long story," muttered Bowser. "What did you find out about the Pendants of Power? Anything useful? Anything resourceful?"

"Definitely found out some great info, but as of now, it's not important," Athelstan replied, lowering his tone. "I'll let you know when it becomes relevant enough to be concerned with. Just trust me on that. There is something though that I think we all should take a look at." He pulled out a rolled up piece of paper from his pants pocket and handed it to the Kruna of Fire. "It's a map."

Bowser snatched the paper from his stone teammate. "Why the hell are you giving me a map?

"So did we just skip the greetings all of a sudden?" Ramona wondered aloud. Everyone gave her a blank, innocent look, to which she shrugged and responded with, "Okay. I hope this isn't gonna be a habit."

"A couple of the koopas inside were talking to Rosalina and I about it," said Athelstan. "They told us they found it in the room Daisy was in before she left, and it has Sarasaland circled! They wanted you to

look at it and thought you'd know what it meant, although I think I have a good idea."

"Well, as I'm scanning through this map now, there's only one possible conclusion that can be made," Bowser mumbled. "That earth wielder has made her way back to her homeland."

"That's what I thought," stated Athelstan. "Which means she must be going there to face her father-"

"Then we have to go there too!" Warra exclaimed in interruption. "We have to be there for backup!"

Athelstan's eyes went wide. "... And which also means that it's the reason why she didn't say anything in the first place. She knew that we would've wanted to tag along, so she didn't mention where or what she was going to do, ensuring that she could take care of *her* personal business *her* self!"

"But you know she's likely not going to be confronting the king himself!" reasoned Warra. "She'll probably have to deal with all of the authority there too, and who knows, maybe even the townspeople!"

"That's a possibility," murmured Andrew. "But let's hope she waited for a chance to face her dad when no one else was around instead of rushing up to him where everyone and anyone could see."

"My, I didn't know crickets were awake this late in the morning," Bowser muttered. A couple seconds of silence followed, during which the insects were indeed audible.

Andrew sighed. "Of course."

"What? Can't you hear them?" asked Bowser.

"Alright, I get it!" the Kruna of Shadow shouted. "So can we go?!"

"She said not to!" Athelstan hollered.

"Forget what she said!" Warra yelled. "She's about to get herself killed!"

Athelstan threw his hands up. "What if she doesn't?"

"What if she does?" replied Marut.

"Respect her wishes!" shouted Bowser.

"Not if they're senseless and irrational!" Warra shouted back.

"Ramona and I are right here!" Andrew yelled. "We can make the portal right now to get us to Sarasaland!"

"Good for you two!" Bowser exclaimed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Andrew snapped.

"Can you guys please not argue?" Ramona pleaded.

"We're not arguing!" Bowser grunted. "We're forcefully and assertively debating!"

"You just don't want to go, do you?" questioned Marut.

"She clearly told us not to follow her," said Athelstan. "So I'm confident in her ability to handle it."

Bowser pointed to the Kruna of Stone. "What he said!"

"You all must go," Rosalina declared without hesitation, speaking up for the first time. Her simple statement caught everyone by surprise. It even caught Rosalina herself by surprise, but she knew why she said it. And yet, she wasn't even aware that she knew herself. It might have been a bit premature, but the only thing she knew was that she was supposed to say it, and there was nothing in her mind, heart, or spirit that made her believe that her statement should be revoked.

After a long pause in which the shifting of the air could be heard and felt, Andrew asked. "Are you... sure, Grand Elder?"

"You... want us to go?" Bowser asked Rosalina.

"It's not a want..." the Elder of the Cosmos replied, her face blank.

"Just go."

The Kruna all stared at Rosalina, mildly surprised, but substantially more pensive. Several moments passed, the Kruna all trying to soak in what Rosalina's request meant and at the same time wondering what made her so definitive. Regardless, no one deemed it necessary to question her.

At some point during the thoughtful, reflective silence, the doors behind the Kruna opened. A koopa stepped out from the palace, leading Princess Peach into the courtyard. Her visit was entirely unexpected and caught everyone off guard.

"Hello... all," Peach mumbled with a wave of her hand. She started blushing when she saw all the people that were gathered together. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"Peach?!" Bowser exclaimed. "Well, no... this is not a bad time at all! Is it, you guys?" The Kruna and Rosalina were all quiet, exchanging looks with each other.

"What's up with Daisy?" Peach asked. "Is she back yet? Did she ever tell you guys where she was going?"

"You know," Marut began. "Those are all good questions, and you know the good thing about good questions is that they never have bad answers, right guys?"

Andrew stepped over and smacked Marut in the back of the head. "Shut up, man!"

"What does that mean?" asked Peach.

"We don't have time, Bowser," said Ramona. "We should probably get moving as soon as we can!"

Bowser sighed. "Listen, Peach; we don't have time to discuss anything at the moment. Rosalina here needs us to take on an important mission, and we all need to get ready to go."

"I apologize, Peach," said Rosalina. "I didn't intend to interfere with whatever plans you had."

"We didn't have any plans," Bowser mumbled to Rosalina with wide eyes.

"Awkward, bro," Marut whispered to Athelstan.

"It's alright; it's quite alright!" Peach assured, her hands on the fritz. "I totally understand! At the very least, please stop by the castle before you leave! Toad has some equipment that I'm sure can be of use to you guys!"

"Alright," replied the Kruna of Fire. "It's much appreciated, Princess."

"And if I don't see you guys again before you leave, I wish you all luck," Peach said with a hearty smile. After a few exchanges of pleasantries, the koopa directed Peach back inside Bowser's Palace to escort her back out to the front of the building and to her vehicle.

"I don't like this," muttered Ramona. "Shouldn't we just tell her?"

"I don't know..." Bowser murmured. "What we're going to be doing now is already against Daisy's wishes..."

Deep within the Catacombs of the mansion in the heart of the Chai Kingdom's Deep Wood, Marissa prepared a special incantation. The five remaining Sweeps were lined up along the entrance to her throne room, silently surveying their leader's affairs. With rapid movement, the demon witch made five different hand signs every three seconds for a full minute while maintaining extrasensory concentration. At the completion of the last set of signs, she opened her Malocchio Eye and threw her palm down on the floor. Her Malocchio glowed with fierce light as an interdimensional portal opened on the floor in front of her. Then, Lord Arkana unlimbered her Mystic Broom and thrust it through the portal as far as she could reach. She managed to hit something.

"OWWWW!" A voice shrieked. Marissa withdrew her broom and leapt up into the air, sensing an incoming being from within the portal. Out came a large Boo with a shining crown, King Boo, rubbing the side of his forehead.

"This looks like bartering to me," Maki whispered to Machula.

"Ah yes," Marissa began. "The veritable King Boo. I must praise you for your work throughout the centuries, your immense amounts of power, and your glistening, wet tongue... that is drooling on my floor – do you mind? I walk there every once in a while!" She threw down her broom for it to wipe up the dripping saliva off the floor from King Boo's outstreched tongue.

"Are brooms supposed to do that?" King Boo asked.

"This one will if you don't put that tongue of yours away!" Marissa howled.

King Boo retracted his tongue back into his mouth. Once Marissa's broom finished sweeping up the drool, Tamara stuck out a hand to blow a gust of wind that dried the broom's bristles. The broom then flew up to Marissa and latched itself across her back.

Marissa touched her fingers together and batted her eyelashes with a devilish smirk. "Now then, let's get down to business-"

"How much money do you got?" King Boo asked, putting out an arm.

"You're a damn ghost!" Marissa cried out. "What do you need money for?!"

"A new crown!" King Boo replied with added sass. "Pfft."

"Told ya," Maki muttered to Machula.

"For what?" Marissa snapped. "You're an undead glob of white stuff – what do you need a crown for?"

"Hey, you owe me something!" King Boo snapped. "That jab to my head was uncalled for! If you're gonna keep doing that, then I need to make sure I have a backup crown!"

"Look; Birabuto Kingdom is already setup for you," said Lord Arkana.

King Boo rubbed where his chin was supposed to be. "Did you get the Boos?"

"Yes."

"Awaken the mummies?"

"Yes."

"Zombies?"

"Yes."

"Dry Bones?"

"Yes."

"Redeads?"

"Ye- wait, what?"

"Alright, I can do without the Redeads," King Boo muttered.

"Fact of the matter is, the Birabuto Kingdom and its pyramids are all yours and waiting for you," said Marissa. "All you must do now is pledge allegiance to me and serve as my Viceroy behind Naraka."

No response came from King Boo. He kept a straight, blank face.

"And whatever money and treasure we acquire from Sarasaland from now through our invasion will be yours," Lord Arkana added.

Still no response came from King Boo. Marissa was starting to get irritated with the ghost's silence. King Boo cleared his throat, as if trying to make a non-verbal gesture.

Marissa sighed, shaking her head. "And you can get King Sarasa's crown after we kill him."

"An interesting offer," said a grinning King Boo. "I *think* I'll take it now."

"This is the crap I have to put up with," Marissa muttered to herself.

"ANYWAYS, I thank you for your cooperation, King Boo, and for your continued loyalty, my precious Sweeps. Judgment day will come in three weeks, at which time we will begin a *new era* . The world will be fixed, but until then, we can prepare in secrecy. The king is too blind to admit or even acknowledge what is happening underneath the soil of his own kingdom..."

"Why did you call us out here at three in the morning?" Neva hollered.

"Because you both slept the entire day; nearly twelve hours, I believe," was Geno's answer. "That's enough. We don't need to be throwing your circadian out of whack. And besides that, I believe now would be a good time to explain to you, Daisy, what you are and why you are what you are now."

Daisy and Neva stood together, opposite Geno out in his sanctuary. The opaque mist overhead was gone for the night, leaving the moon and stars in full view. A light haze remained on the valley floor, surreal and mystical in its appearance.

"It's cyclical here," said Geno. "The haze rises into the sky during the day and blocks the sun, only to recede and diminish at night. It wasn't always like that though. The sun used to shine freely upon this area. I believe the environment is giving us signs of Marissa's uprising and growing influence over the lands, as if it is trying to give... a warning."

"A warning, you say?" questioned Neva.

"Yes," replied Geno. "Changes are on the horizon, regardless of the outcome of the coming days. They can either be good, or horrendously terrible. Marissa or King Sarasa – either one will bring about widespread destruction, just in different forms with different intents." He peered at Daisy. "I don't believe I had an opportunity to actually get a good look at your current state. I am all but certain of what you are, but a quick scan of your body and features should give me confirmation."

Daisy nodded in response. Geno examined the bestial form of Daisy with intrigue, taking note of the strange metamorphosis. He expected that if someone were to transform in the way she did, they would have done so fully, not partially. Neva stood with her arms crossed as the moon spread its lunar light across the land.

"So?" asked Daisy. "What do you think? What's going on with me?"

"This is quite bizarre," Geno muttered as he continued to scan over the Kruna of Earth's deformed body. "This reminds me of something, though I'm not sure exactly what; something to do with a half-man, half-beast."

"Halloween?" Neva suggested, laughing. "You can take your costume off, dirt-eater." Her remarks drew a snarl from Daisy, a gesture that sounded more menacing and primal as a result of the earth wielder's transformation.

"It's so puzzling how this transformation of yours occurred," stated Geno, ignoring the bickering.

"Didn't you just say you were pretty much certain you knew what I was?" Daisy questioned.

"I know of the transformation that you have undergone," replied Geno. "But it appears that your metamorphosis stopped before it was able to fully change you. An odd case indeed, however, it should not be too much of an issue to remedy."

"You think so?" Daisy asked, gazing at her now clawed hands.

Geno nodded. "Certainly. There's a couple things we'll need to accomplish first, but all we need is some effort, determination, and prayer."

"That's a relief, because I need to get back to normal!" Daisy shouted. "That's a priority, especially considering the number and power of the enemies we have to face! This form is so clunky and weird to use and I haven't been able to effectively focus my element or use my Nova Form since turning into this beast-"

"Nova Form, was that?" Geno asked, suddenly beaming with

interest. "You know what, that may be just it. It is certainly likely that you being able to enter the Nova Form at will made it so that you retained your consciousness when the Betedaimon venom was introduced into your body!"

Daisy looked at Geno, confusion in her eyes. "Betedaimon?"

"That is what you currently are," said Geno. "Or rather, what you partially are. You said your mutation was a result of venom from Marissa, correct? Her venom is Betedaimon venom. It is a self-proclaimed label from Lord Arkana herself, though I can not explain what a Betedaimon is since no one has seen an actual Betedaimon and therefore no one knows what it is supposed to be or look like. No one but Marissa Arkana, that is. Usually, when someone is infused with the venom, they're never seen again. And even if they are, they're not recognizable in the least. That's why I say, no one can tell what exactly a Betedaimon is. But, I do know that if the Betedaimon venom is able to take root within you, then your transformation will not be able to reverse, at which point your mutation will complete itself and you *will* become the Betedaimon."

"So if the venom takes root, then I'll be permanently transformed?" Daisy asked with distaste.

"Yes, Sarasa," answered Geno. "Fret not, though. I don't believe you have to worry about it taking root. The mere fact that you were able to halt the transformation halfway means that something within you – independent of your ability to utilize the Nova Form – is resisting not necessarily the venom itself but the influence of the venom."

"That doesn't mean I want to remain in this awkward, hulking form," muttered the Kruna of Earth. "It's like I'm going through puberty again – I don't know how to work this body sometimes. That's definitely something that has to be remedied fast, both because of who we're facing and because of my lack of patience trying to articulate my altered joints."

"It's not all that bad," reasoned Geno. "This Betedaimon form of yours can allow you to realize latent gifts and talents that you never thought you had within you; gifts that the modernization of the human race has made dormant." He paused and lowered his tone.

"And independent of those gifts, you must stay in this Betedaimon form for now."

"Why, if you don't mind me asking?" Daisy replied, mildly irritated.

"In order to defeat Marissa – and your father – you will need complete mastery over the Nova Form," Geno responded.

Daisy let out a quick breath. "What do you mean 'complete mastery?' What does staying a beast have to do with mastery over the Nova Form?"

"The Nova Form takes a lot out of the user," Geno explained. "Energy is wasted just for the transformation to occur, and power and focus are both expended just to maintain the state and to ensure that you don't lose control – physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally – of yourself. Because of this, you're never truly able to fight at your best when you transform. With total mastery over it however, you can bypass many of the negative effects of the Nova state, allowing you to conserve your energy and stay in the form with little to no strain on your body. Therefore, you will never be able to experience the full power of the Nova Form unless you obtain mastery over it."

"But why do I have to stay in this Betedaimon form to do so?" Daisy questioned. Although impressed by Geno's wisdom, she was obviously not happy.

"Yeah, I'm getting tired of working with this bestial abomination," Neva mumbled.

"Look, I need to get my father out of office!" Daisy growled, volume rising. "I can't do that looking like this – he'll twist my appearance around and use it to his advantage to keep all of Sarasaland's citizens on his side! I have to return to being a full human, not a Betedaimon-human!"

"The ancient, primal essence of our being," said Geno. "The Nova Form awakens this all within a person, but to have caught hold of Marissa's Betedaimon venom, it takes the utmost amount of willpower to be able to restrain and keep that beastly nature

subdued." He lightened his voice to attempt to make Daisy feel better. "I'm pretty sure your initial Nova Transformation elicited a rather unsettling response both from you and the people around you."

"Well," Daisy began. "They didn't freak out, but they were surprised, and probably somewhat scared too, I mean, judging by the way they were looking at me..." She decided not to mention anything regarding her subsequent battle with Kokoro.

With a nod, Geno snapped his fingers. "That is why you can not enter your Nova state as you are now, because in a way, you *are* in your Nova Form! Therefore, in order to have complete mastery over the Nova Form, you must exercise mastery over your Betedaimon form and all of its primal attributes."

"And after I do so?" Daisy asked.

"Then we shall worry about that when the time comes," replied Geno. "There is someone you will have to see who will get you back to normal, but that is not your immediate concern. For now, let's get started with the first phase of the training you will need to achieve the aforementioned mastery."

"Training, huh?" Daisy murmured, smirking. "Yeah, that'll be great. Marissa was generous enough to give me this new body, so I may as well reap all the benefits from it while I can."

Neva started chuckling and shaking her head. "This oughta be good..."

Chapter X

Rivalry Reborn:

"Now put your hands out," Geno ordered. Daisy did as the cosmic being said and put her hands forward so that her palms were facing him. There was less than five feet of space between the two beings. "We'll try something a little different since you're having difficulty with defending against elemental attacks."

Not even an hour into the first phase of training, Daisy was struggling. Geno wanted to test the combat skills and tendencies of the Kruna of Earth, so underneath the early morning moon and with Neva's assistance, he devised a series of drills for the earth wielder to complete. It took some time for Daisy to get an adequate sense of coordination and comfort with her new body, but she was soon able to perform at a level close to where she was with her normal form. All the offensive-based drills, Daisy excelled in and was near-perfect. Her excellence even with the adjustments she was still making with her new body prompted Geno to make the decision to move on to defensive drills. The only two defensive drills they managed to attempt, one with Geno's light and the other with Neva's ice, gave Daisy trouble and made her look like a complete novice. The stark contrast in performance made Geno upset, but entertained Neva.

"This will be an exercise in defending against pure energy attacks," said Geno. "Careful – this may kill you."

Daisy perked up. "Wait wha-"

Out came a burst of energy, and although Daisy had her guard up, she could not hold it back. The blast knocked her flat on her back several yards away as it flew off into the base of the mountains in the distance.

"Nice job," Neva quipped. "I didn't think being one-dimensional was physically possible."

What's that supposed to mean? Daisy thought, still laying on the ground.

"Get up," Geno ordered. "I'll give you the grace of being able to put up a wall of earth to defend yourself with this time."

With a grumpy grimace, Daisy sprang up and stomped her foot into the ground, kicking up a crooked but thick barrier of soil and clay. Geno readied another blast and fired again, the energy cutting through Daisy's wall and knocking the earth wielder back several more yards. She clawed the ground to keep her from flopping again, but was visibly annoyed with her failure.

"You're having difficulty with any sort of defense, it seems," Geno added. "You have to be aware that not all techniques can be evaded, and even your earth wielder endurance can not last forever."

"I know!" growled Daisy. "But it's so damn difficult to stay in one place and exert energy with no intention of directing it anywhere!"

"Usually, it's the other way around where people have trouble," muttered Neva. "Please stop being so back-asswards. I'm better off trying to knock off Arkana and the king by myself."

"It's amazing how brilliant and elite you are with offensive maneuvers, Sarasa," said Geno. "And yet... it's equally as amazing how pathetic and sorely lacking you are in the defensive department. Under whom did you craft your earth wielding abilities, if anyone?"

"From my old master, Terran," replied Daisy. "My training with him wasn't combat focused though. It was all about elemental control and building power. I sorta just went from there and came up with my own attacks as I got better, but I never really knew how to defend so I kinda just skipped over that."

Geno nodded with a hand on his chin. "I see..."

"I know what you're going to say," Daisy grumbled with a sigh. "You're going to force me into developing some defensive skills and

give me a whole spiel about weaknesses being limitations, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily," Geno responded with a chuckle. "I don't think it's something you should be concerned with."

"Wait – really?" the Kruna of Earth asked. "What makes you say that? The was the last thing I was expecting!"

"What I am thinking of is the idea of further becoming a *specialized* fighter," Geno explained. "I think we can all acknowledge that each of us are born with natural gifts and latent or not so latent abilities. For you, Daisy, your affinity for earth automatically predisposes your body to a heightened level of structural endurance along with enhanced night vision, and the fact that you've been able to develop such a phenomenal combination of physical strength and speed can be attributed in part because of what you have inherited from your parents. See technically, you're already ahead of the game because you have the brute force of a stone wielder and the movement capabilities of an air wielder. So what I'm about to say might come as a shock to you, but I think that our abilities to really expand our talents is a critical thing to understand: Daisy, forget about defense."

"Forget about defense?" Daisy repeated with confusion. "Are you sure, Geno?"

"Forget about it entirely," replied Geno. "The more you try to force defense into your style, the more you disrupt your offensive capacities. Your dodging and evasion can take its place, and if you're comfortable with blocking melee attacks – which you should be considering your hand-to-hand proficiency – then that can only help you. But as far as pure defense, just forget it."

"That sounds back-asswards too, old puppet," remarked Neva. "Should I check your brain-case for termites?"

"Well, ponder this, Neva," Geno began. "If someone has a strong affinity for fire, then they would be best served taking up fire wielding and would progress really far and become beyond formidable – granted, that he or she adjusts and fine tunes a few things that I will get to in just a moment. Now, if that same person decided for some

reason to try and take up stone wielding or shadow wielding, that learning curve becomes so pronounced that this person with an affinity for fire will be lucky enough to master all the basics and not much more than that. And for that matter, what good are basics out in the field? Basics are the basis upon which elemental wielders build their fighting strategy and style; basics are the foundation of a fighter's tactics and techniques. And being opposites, if that fire person wanted to take up ice wielding, they'd have an easier time trying to fly away from a black hole... when they can't even fly. Not saying that it's impossible-"

"Yeah you are," Neva butted-in.

"Okay, the black hole analogy did not do the right service," Geno replied. "But in any case, it's an anomaly and a rarity for someone to be able to wield an element different from that which they already have an affinity for, and even then, their control would be limited. This person with the affinity for fire can just accept and embrace the fact that his or her gifts are with fire wielding, or he or she can fight against it and be pretty mediocre wielding water or light. This concept goes well beyond elements; *that* I believe you're well aware of."

"Now that you mention it, I'm pretty horrible with any sort of elemental tool," Daisy noted. "I'm pretty bad at swimming, and pretty terrible at aerial combat, or really anything at an altitude that's too high for that matter. But I've always felt unstoppable on the ground and with my own two hands!"

"That's good," said Geno. "You're able to recognize that while you have things you're really good at, you have tangible weaknesses. Now, someone might say that in order for us to be the very best that we can be, we should work on building up those weaknesses so that we're more, 'complete,' or some similar, arbitrary term. That's all fine and well, and can work for some. The problem there is that, a lot of the time, bringing up weaknesses requires substantially more effort and time than optimizing your strengths. Even if you built up those weaknesses, they're still lagging behind your strengths! If you were by yourself, then you don't really have much of a choice in the matter – you're gonna have to address your weaknesses! But seeing as how you're part of a team, whether they're currently here

or not, just play your role! Make sure that you're the best at what you do and trust that everyone else is the best at what they each individually do! That's how football works! We're not going to sign six kickers to the offense to play at receiver and on the o-line! And if I see a receiver who would be better served playing at corner, then I would consider switching them over to corner! Each player has a skill or set of skills that they excel at and they have their own position to play. It's the same thing for you."

Neva turned to Daisy and shook her head. "Doesn't sound like you can be a threat to anyone if you're not addressing all facets of the craft. You should know as well as I do that battles are lost more often than not because of a weakness that shone through. Not being able to effectively utilize an elemental tool – something that should make your wielding that much easier – is pretty embarrassing. If I handed you a sword, would you look for a trigger and try to shoot it?"

"That's enough, Neva," stated Geno. "A question for you; why should Daisy strain and torture herself trying to become proficient using swords or nunchaku or, heaven forbid, a morningstar? Or better yet, even earth-based tools; why should she spend so much time trying to master claws and drills and saws when she's been successful just relying on her joint weights for assisting in elemental control and on her hand-to-hand skill for combat? If you look throughout history, you'll find that the beings who are the all-around type more often than not are nothing more than average. The well-rounded individuals have no weaknesses, yet have no strengths because they spent so much time trying to develop their weaknesses that they did not address their strengths as well as they could have. Are they versatile? Yes, but are they able in any way to contribute in some area with more than decent or average performance? Maybe every once in a while, you'll get that freak of nature, stalwart workhorse who's like the Swiss Army knife 2.0 that essentially renders a team of separate specialists redundant, but you're far more likely to come across these all-round types where their very weakness is the fact that they have no strengths to capitalize on."

Neva sighed, a little upset that she could not come up with a

response. "Okay, that's a good point."

"But for the record, Neva, I'm not asserting that my way is right or that the ways of others are wrong," said Geno. "I'm just giving my perspective on things and what I believe is the best scenario to move forward with in this situation, and that's not regarding the limited amount of time we have to work with either. Your power reserves are absurdly substantial, Neva, even for ice wielders. I suggest you take advantage of that to make up for your lack of physical strength and endurance. Obviously, in a perfect world, we wouldn't have weaknesses and metaphorical kryptonite and everyone would be great at everything and we could just measure everyone by one all-encompassing 'power level'-type number, but life's not perfect!"

"Power levels," muttered Neva. "That sounds kinda stupid to me."

Daisy started getting giddy and excessively animated. "So are you going to show me some new, super cool and awesome battle moves and tricks?"

"No," was Geno's flat response.

"What?!" Daisy exclaimed. "So you lectured me about my fighting style and how I should optimize my offense and yet you're not going to show me a single attack?"

"I didn't want to spend so much time talking, but I felt it would only be to your benefit," Geno replied. "Besides all that I just mentioned and that we just did, your training with me is not going to be combat-centric anyways. I only desired to see your capabilities so that I know what we're working with. We are here to cultivate you in your Betedaimon body so that you can access the true capacities of your Nova Form once you have been healed and restored to normal. A little more physical work and assessment is needed before we can progress to our next phase of your training."

Toad led the Kruna into his armory in the back of Princess Peach's castle. It was like a laboratory, a forgery, and a garage all in one,

complete with several weapons, tools, equipment, and tables loaded with miscellaneous parts and crafting gadgets. The size of Toad's collection was impressive, especially considering the fact that most of the time, it was just him working in there.

"This is amazing," Athelstan murmured in awe.

"This armory's better than I expected!" Bowser exclaimed.

"Hey; I learned from Professor E. Gadd, the best in the business!" exclaimed Toad. "So let's get down to business! Like my play on word's there? Yeah? It was like a spur of the moment kinda thing – anyways! Big guy in brown, I got something perfect for you. The rest of you all can help yourselves! Everything's separated according to their individual, specific element – excluding the general equipment, that is. Sorry; most of the tools have no color-coding and are just metallic shades."

"So what would you like us to do with our old equipment?" Warra asked.

Toad shrugged. "You can just leave 'em here. I doubt you'll ever go back to using those inefficient pieces once you get a hold of what I have to offer. I'm sure some of the townsfolk could manage to use your old equip' for lawn chores."

As the Kruna all spread out to various sections of the room, Athelstan followed Toad to a table that had thick slabs of metal on it. Toad directed the Kruna of Stone to sit down in the nearby chair.

"And take off your boots," Toad added. "Then hand them to me."

Athelstan did as Toad directed. Toad put the boots on the table and then got to work melding metal slabs to their fronts and backs. Athelstan did not recall seeing such crafting being done on footwear.

"Well, I'll be waiting out in the halls for you guys," said Bowser, motioning for the entrance.

"I have something set aside for you, Bowser," Toad called out. "It's in that red chest over at the front of the fire equipment."

"No, it's fine," the Koopa King insisted. "I shouldn't-"

"Bowser," said Toad. "It's alright. We're cool."

Bowser just stood there, unable to come up with a response or identify what he was feeling. Although he had no intention to take it back, the unofficial peace made between him and the Mushroom Kingdom felt awkward. It was as if he felt that all the hostility he showed in the past, regardless of the circumstances, was unforgivable and could not be forgotten. *All those battles,* Bowser thought, his eyes glistening with moisture. *How could they be put aside like this? To think, the grudge I held so long for my parents, and now, you, Peach, Toad, you're able to forgive and move on so easily...*

"Please, take what's in the chest," Toad said again.

Warra took down the two silver Aqua Axes from the wall, surprised with the compact and lightweight design of tools that would have been conventional for stone or air wielders. "These are some very innovative inventions, Toad."

"I'll say!" Ramona exclaimed, putting on the hip sheath to the Light Broadsword she picked out.

With one of the newly upgraded boots in his left hand, Toad opened his right palm and sent a small, focused wave of fire onto the metal attachments to hone and temper the pieces. He repeated the process with the other boot.

"I didn't know you were a fire wielder," Athelstan commented.

"Mostly for crafting and fortifying all this equipment," Toad replied, handing the Kruna of Stone's boots back. "Now try these on."

Athelstan lifted and lowered the boots a few times. "They got a little bit of weight to 'em, don't they?"

"You're a strong dude, aren't you?" Toad asked. "The weight of the shoes should only help you. I call them, 'Boot Club Additions!' Not a very imaginative title but they're growing in popularity among the stone wielders around here! Try kicking rocks with *those* !"

Athelstan put them on and took a few steps. A smile crept on his face as he began imagining himself on a vast, open field playing soccer with a giant boulder. "Awesome, Toad!"

"Of course, those aren't going to be the only things you'll have to rely on in battle," said Toad. "Go on and check out the stone equipment over there!"

"Hey Toad," Andrew said. "Do you think you could upgrade these twin forearm machetes? I inherited these from our late friend, so I want to keep them in use."

Toad nodded. "Just give me the specifications. You're a shadow wielder, right?"

"Yeah," the fighter in black and purple replied. "If you could keep the design mostly the same, but also add a handle to each to sorta mimic a reverse-grip sword? I had one before but it was destroyed in battle."

"I'd like to stick with my ninjato too!" Marut told Toad. "I've done great with it, so I wanna keep the good thing going, you know?"

"Alright, after I get done with him," Toad replied.

With hesitance, Bowser moved towards the aforementioned red chest. He still felt unworthy of such kindness from Peach and Toad. Peach especially had been more than willing to move forward. As far as he knew, Mario and Luigi could still be harboring some anger over all their previous encounters and could still be wary of his actions. He held off from opening the chest, instead just staring at it, at a loss for what to do.

"So where exactly are you guys headed in such a hurry?" Toad asked as he searched around for adequate handles to accommodate Andrew.

"Important mission," Warra answered. "Rosalina wants us to go. That's all we're allowed to say."

"I hear ya," replied Toad. "Covert operations. I'm not gonna question the authority in charge of that decision."

That right there , Bowser thought. *Why didn't I just say right there that we were going to go to Sarasaland to assist Daisy? Why should I have anything to hide? If Peach and Toad are being so accepting of me, then shouldn't I be honest and upfront about where Daisy is and where we're going? Does it really matter if Daisy wants anyone there or not when we're about to go there now?*

"That's why your timely equipment upgrades are really appreciated," said Ramona. "Something tells me this is going to be a very difficult mission."

"You know," Toad began. "I'm pretty sure if you waited for a little while, I could get Mario and Luigi over here to come with you guys and help out! You're gonna have to wait for a little bit while I work on Andrew and Marut's tools. It shouldn't take long though; I'll be done within the hour for sure."

"I feel like a gladiator now!" Athelstan bellowed, hoisting the Avalanche Spear and Stone Shield high. "Somebody get me a red cape so I can do the 'Toro toro' bit with the bulls!"

"Uh, wrong sport, Athelstan," Andrew said in correction.

Mario and Luigi both would just steal the spotlight! Bowser mused. *I'm pretty sure Daisy's had enough of that. At least with just us Kruna, she wouldn't have to compete with us. I can't let the Mushroom Kingdom crew know where Daisy is. They'll be more of a distraction than an aid...*

"No, this is something *we* have to do," Warra said to Toad. "I'm sure Mario and Luigi have their hands full right about now with some very important matters of their own."

"They usually do," Toad responded. "That's a large part of why I took up forgery as a blacksmith and engineer. I originally wanted to take after ol' E. Gadd and play a more substantial role in Mario and Luigi's quests, and after a while, I've begun providing goods for the general public of the Mushroom Kingdom!" Hard at work upgrading Andrew's elemental tools, Toad did not notice that Bowser had yet to open the chest. "Where's Daisy been?" Toad then asked, still not taking his eyes off his work. "Don't you think you should get

something for her? Digging Claws? Monty Talons? Laser Drill? Earth Rippers? Any of it sound like something she could use?"

"Nah, she's more of a hands-on fighter," replied Marut.

"Maybe she could get away with using a baseball bat," Toad joked. He then ignited the tips of each of the fingers on one of his hands to make precise adjustments to the Kruna of Shadow's tools, showing amazing attention to detail. "But anyways, seriously, where's she been? As if I even need to ask – she's always in and out of the Mushroom Kingdom!"

Warra chuckled. "Yep, well, you know how she is. We're all starting to realize that about her."

I have to tell them! Bowser exclaimed in his mind. *I have to tell Peach, and I have to tell Toad! It would just be wrong to keep a secret like this, I mean-*

Bowser suddenly felt a hand pat near his shoulder. He turned to see Athelstan, not surprised that it was the Kruna of Stone since he was the only one in the room capable of reaching that high up. "What's going on, buddy?" Athelstan asked. He kept his volume down so that only the Koopa King heard him. "Toad wants you to open that chest! Toad is offering you a gift that *you* need to take!"

"You know what," Bowser muttered. "For a big, muscly guy, you're pretty soft."

"And what does that make you?" replied Athelstan.

"Yeah man, go on and open it!" A new voice called out.

Bowser and Athelstan both whipped around to see Mario, Luigi, and Peach standing behind them. The newcomers caught the attention of Toad and the other Kruna. Bowser was certain that it was Luigi who had just spoke out.

"Man, whenever I see you now, you're always busy!" Mario said to the Kruna of Fire.

Peach walked over to the red chest and picked it up. "I'll open it for

you, Bowser. You must take them. You have no choice."

"Wait; you know what's inside?" questioned Bowser. He then glanced over at Toad, then at Mario, Luigi, and back at Peach. "Do you all know?"

"It's no coincidence that we're here now!" Luigi remarked.

Peach opened the chest and set it back on the table, then pulled from within it a pair of gold and crimson metal braces. Bowser looked at the pieces of equipment, wondering what they were. The way Peach was looking at him though, they weren't just elemental tools to use on a mission. No, they represented something substantially more significant.

"Interesting," stated Athelstan. "What are they exactly?"

"They're Blazer Claws," Toad explained. "They're attachments for each wrist. When they're retracted and not in use, they're just braces, but when they're expanded, they're claws that give the user a little bit of extra slash reach. Flick your wrist up to activate and deactivate the Blazer Claws."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" hollered Marut. "What's that guy with the claws – that's like that one guy! Uh, Lion Man! No wait... Pantherine! Wolfersteen – Wolborg! Oh, I can't remember his name!"

"Go ahead, man!" Luigi urged to Bowser. "Put 'em on, put 'em on!"

Peach gave the elemental tools to Bowser for him to slip on. The Blazer Claws fit snug and secure, perfect for the silhouette of the Kruna of Fire's wrists. Upon activation, five claw-like extensions flared from the braces to mimic larger, metallic versions of Bowser's hands. He gazed at the Blazer Claws, amazed by the craftsmanship and detailing and moved by the fiery "B" engraved on the backhand side. Deactivating the Blazer Claws reverted the tools back to wrist braces.

"Take them," Luigi said to Bowser. "They're yours."

"Wherever you're going, we hope these will be of aid to you," Peach said with a warm smile. "Mario, Luigi, Toad and I; we had been

planning something to give you as a gift for the past couple days now. There's no doubt in my mind that you're going to put them to good use, Koopa King."

"By the way!" Luigi blurted out. "Do you guys know someone by the name of Kokoro?"

Up until now, the Kruna all displayed serene and jolly expressions and mannerisms, but the mention of Kokoro wiped it all away. Images of that decisive, bloody conflict between Daisy and the Soul Stealer at the Ice Shrine came flooding back to the minds of the Kruna. Warra went blue in the face with shock, hoping Luigi was just kidding. The archfiend had proved to be one of the most dangerous and deceptive enemies they had come across.

"He came here looking for Daisy," Mario added. "He left as soon as we mentioned she wasn't here!"

I knew it, Warra thought. *You shouldn't've let him walk away like that, Daisy. He's probably tracking you down as we speak!*

Peach turned to Bowser. "Is Daisy in danger from this, 'Kokoro' person?"

"No, I really don't think so," Bowser replied. "Don't worry about it, please. She'll be fine."

"I second that," said Athelstan. "She's a formidable adversary to have to go up against, and besides, no one knows where she even went, right guys?"

Marut, Andrew, and Ramona each gave responses confirming Athelstan's statement, but Bowser and Warra kept silent. Ramona peered at Bowser and tried willing a non-verbal cue to both him and Warra to not say anything about Daisy's possible whereabouts, more likely than not gaining awareness of both Bowser's discomfort and Warra's mounting worry in the process. The Kruna of Light swiftly decided to change the subject, asking, "So why were you so hesitant to accept the Blazer Claws, Bowser? They're pretty hot tools, I believe! Pun intended!"

"It's okay, Bowser," Peach insisted. "We're okay. Like we said, they're for you. They're our blessing to you. We're all okay."

"We are okay," murmured Bowser, unsure of what to even feel. There was so much to have to take in at once.

"I don't understand what the problem is," Marut mumbled.

"Neither do I," said Luigi. "Am I missing something?"

"You're missing the context of several years ago," said Bowser. "The context of why we were even enemies in the first place. I was just a young koopa in line to ascend to the throne..."

About an hour passed before Toad finished Andrew's Shadow Blades and Marut's Cyclone Ninjato. Now, with everyone in Peach's Courtyard, Ramona and Andrew got set to create the portal that would take the Kruna to their destination. Once the light and shadow wielders combined their energies and focused on their intended location, they created the gateway that would bridge there. Mario, Peach, Luigi, and Toad stood with the Kruna, ready to give them a send-off.

"It all makes sense now, Bowser," said Mario. "I never knew that your campaign against Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom ran so deep. That was so long ago too. It's amazing you were able to endure those pains, and it's even more amazing how far you've come since then."

"It's amazing how far we've all come," Peach added. "I'd like to thank you, Bowser, for helping me to realize the mistakes I made as a young ruler back then."

"Hey, you helped me in a lot of ways," replied Bowser. "I should be thanking you." He turned to the renowned fire wielder beside Peach. "Mario."

"It's good to have ya on our side," said Mario with a smile. "And it's great to finally have an understanding of it all, as well as some perspective."

"Yeah!" Luigi exclaimed. "To be quite frank, you never really seemed too much like the 'bad guy'-type anyways!"

Bowser turned to his Kruna partners, ready to apologize to his Kruna partners for having not said anything before about his grudge against Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom, but Ramona put up a hand and stopped him before he said anything. "It's alright," she assured with a face of approval.

"Life's just full of challenges," Warra remarked. "We all have our own trials to deal with." He looked at Marut, who gave him a nod.

"Thanks, you guys," Bowser said to his teammates.

"Rosalina has granted you her grace, and I give you my blessing," Peach said to the Kruna of Fire. "Your mother and father both would have been beyond proud."

"Things are gonna be different now, it seems," murmured Mario.

"Maybe not too different," stated Bowser. "I have to admit; going up against you over the years has been pretty fun in a way. I think we could remain opponents, but in a good-natured way."

Mario's smile deepened. "Yeah. We oughta get together for a round of golf sometime, whenever you have the chance."

"Sure, if you like losing," Bowser replied. He and Mario both then started laughing.

"Well until then, we got somewhere to go!" Warra urged, pointing to the portal. "C'mon!"

"Man, for a water wielder, you lack patience, don't you?" commented Toad.

"It's just that we have a pressing matter to get to..." Warra replied.

"Hey; you guys all take care, okay?" Bowser said to the Mushroom Kingdom crew. He then looked explicitly at Peach to add, "Watch over my palace while we're gone, okay?"

Peach nodded. "Most assuredly."

Mario gave the Kruna all a salute. "Be seeing you."

"You can count on it," Bowser replied. He and Mario came together and shook hands; forever rivals, but now, of a different nature.

With that, the Kruna entered the portal, one by one, ready to face the potential threats waiting for them on the other side. There was no telling what they could come across on their quest, but it didn't matter. Whatever challenges awaited, they had to overcome. Mario looked on as the portal began to weaken and dissipate. He couldn't help but think that there were good things to come from Bowser. Luigi and Toad stood with similar thoughts to Mario. Peach cupped her hands in prayer, hoping for the best.

"Alright, bro," Mario said to Luigi. "We need to get started on a very important mission of our own..."

Daisy darted around the fields of Geno's Sanctuary in the waning moments of the early morning darkness, amazed at how much more limber and agile she was. The Kruna of Earth was effortlessly dashing in all directions and rotations, swapping between using her feet and working on all fours of her body without a single break in stride or an awkward transition. She wondered why she never before attempted or even thought of using some of the acrobatics she was engaging in and completing now. Even in her hulking, bestial form, she was moving like an expert ballerina or ice skater or even a panther on the prowl. She couldn't believe it. All those years where her movements were harsh, strict, and ungraceful, and now she was making smooth, streamlined cuts and spins that would make a master air wielder proud.

This is looking good, Sarasa, Geno thought as he watched the Kruna's movements. *You adapt quick. I've sensed something troubling coming from your aura, however. You seemed to be holding a lot of tension and force in your techniques before, even with the simplest of moves. That still holds true now. The Betedaimon transformation should have amplified these traits, but I*

believe that the transformation has not had any such influence in your case. No, you're angsty and angry on your own. And yet, I get the feeling you're not supposed to be a person of such furious frustration. You're supposed to be much more cheerful and luminous. Something in your past has stuck with you, perhaps? That will only make what we need to accomplish later on more difficult...

"Alright – we've seen enough of you dancing around the valley, cave-dweller!" Neva shouted.

As if on cue, Daisy leapt up into the air and turned herself into a revolving drill as she twisted herself down at the ground and burrowed underneath the terrain. A couple seconds later, the Kruna of Earth ripped out of the ground a dozen yards behind Neva and Geno.

"Very well executed, earth wielder," said Geno. "I am now seeing much more fluid, natural movements from you that are not zapping you of your energy."

"I feel as light as a feather and as wired as a battery!" Daisy proclaimed.

"Even with those ankle and wrist weights of yours?" muttered Neva. "Insanity."

"The mind can be your greatest ally, but your greatest enemy," remarked Geno. "We are all who we are because our minds have collectively brought us to our current day reality. However, oftentimes you'll see fighters fall prey to their minds in combat, leaving themselves wide open for a fatal blow. They think too much. One thought leads to another, leading to another, and another, and soon they freeze, not knowing what to do. As you maneuvered around the valley just now, how much were you thinking, Sarasa?"

"Well, not much at all, actually," the Kruna of Earth responded, scratching her head.

"There you go," replied Geno. "Rely on your impulse, and not even your thoughts can betray you."

"Yeah, okay," stated Neva, disregarding Geno's words. "Remind me again why you yourself can't beat Marissa at this very moment if you're more powerful than she is?"

"It's simple," answered Geno. "Marissa Arkana is immortal."

"What?!" Daisy and Neva exclaimed in unison.

"She cannot die by any means. She has maintained the youth of a young adult, she is entirely impervious to disease, and her body is indestructible. If she sustains an injury, she'll heal all damage the first opportunity to recover she gets. How did all this happen? That's a good question, and that makes it all the more important that you take these preparations seriously, the *both* of you."

"Understood," murmured Daisy. Neva said nothing.

"I'm glad we're moving through this at the pace we are, Daisy," said Geno. "Now that you've become accustomed to your current form and are able to maintain a moderate portion of your former control over earth, I'll give you some more time to adjust yourself and your energies, and then once the sun has risen and the mist has returned to these mountains, we will progress to our *real* training."

Chapter XI

Geno, the Stern Mystic :

With the sun high over the landscape of the Muda Kingdom, the occluding haze returned to the air above Geno's Sanctuary. Geno emerged from his house to rejoin Daisy and Neva. Interestingly enough, it was Neva who was the one pacing around with impatience. Daisy was stretched out on the ground, her eyes closed but not asleep. It was the most relaxed she had been since arriving in Sarasaland despite her beastly transformation. She sat up once she sensed Geno coming close.

"We shall begin now with our main training," said Geno.

"Awesome!" Daisy screamed, jumping to her feet. "So what kind of special, elite training methods are we going to be using now?"

"Calm down!" Geno snapped. The remark caught Neva's attention, who decided to waltz her way over to the Kruna of Earth and the cosmic figure.

"Oh, sorry," Daisy mumbled. "But I'm pretty excited to get going with the training!"

"No excitement!" Geno snapped again. "Just calm. This is very serious work! The sooner we get through with this training, the sooner you will be able to revert back to your normal self! Not to mention, there is another phase to your training that you will have to complete once you return to your full human status!"

Daisy bowed forward. "Understood."

"Good," Geno said. "Now, from here on out, it is crucial that you maintain absolute focus and concentration. Sit down with me."

Daisy nodded and took a seat on the ground. Geno then sat across from her, maintaining a distance of five yards or so between them. Neva opted to remain standing, her arms crossed and eyebrows

raised in wonder of what kind of training Geno could possibly be talking about doing in such a position.

"In your Betedaimon form, your connection with nature is as strong as it will ever be," Geno began. "The same goes with your affinity to your element. You may have experienced difficulties controlling earth in the short time you've been in your current form, but it is transient. After we finish getting through this phase of training, not only will your control over earth be fully restored, but amplified as well, and that is only one of the benefits you will realize. Once you return to your normal form, all that you have learned and improved upon in your Betedaimon body will carryover."

"Okay," said Neva. "All I got from that is that an earth wielder is most at home in a cave where they can hide from the sun and play with all the mud and soil they can figuratively and literally stomach."

Daisy scowled at Neva before shifting her gaze back to Geno. "So what are we going to be doing?"

"Your chakras," Geno answered. "For the first half of this phase of training, we must cleanse and purify your chakras. It is not a tall task to have to complete, but the speed at which it is done is entirely dependent on you, Sarasa."

"Chakras?" Daisy and Neva both asked.

Geno nodded. "Yes, chakras. They are what make up the entirety of your life force. The cleansing and purification of your chakras allows for an unrestricted flow of energy, therein allowing you both to tap into reserves you never thought you had. This is why I requested that you stay calm. For us to proceed, you must be in a meditative state."

"Oh, okay!" Daisy replied. She took a deep breath and suppressed all of her energy. Neva cocked her head to the side and gave Daisy and Geno disinterested looks.

"You're welcome to follow along if you so desire, Neva," offered Geno. "As I have said, these exercises will offer benefit for you as well."

"No thanks," Neva replied. "I don't subscribe to such hocus-pocus." She turned to head for the tunnel leading out of the sanctuary. "If you need me, I'll be out scouting around the area."

"You know what I said before," Geno warned. "Don't go out exploring off on your own for too long, unless you want to become a victim of the demon witch." Neva just flicked her hand in response. She didn't seem to care, nor was she worried. Geno sighed and then directed all his attention to the Kruna in front of him. "When you have achieved a meditative state, Daisy, then we shall begin with cleansing your first chakra."

From the portal formed in the vast desert emerged Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, and Andrew. The Kruna touched down on the sandy terrain and all looked around to survey the abandoned region. Ramona and Andrew dispelled the portal, certain that they arrived at the right locale.

"This is Sarasaland?" Marut wondered aloud. "Boring! What's with all the sand and pyramids? That's all I see for miles around! HEY! ANYBODY WANT TO TELL US WHERE WE ARE?!"

"You're loud enough to wake the dead," Andrew muttered to Marut.

"Andrew's right," said Bowser. "Be *quiet* . We don't need to be attracting any attention. We don't know what's lurking around out here."

"Hey! You guys!" an unknown voice called out. The eyes of the Kruna all darted to a billboard sign several yards away and off to the side.

"I could have sworn I just heard that billboard talk," Ramona mumbled with a shudder.

"Don't be ridiculous!" replied Bowser. "Signs don't talk."

"Hey! You guys!" the voice repeated. "Over here!"

"This is no time for jokes, Andrew!" Bowser retorted. "Cut out the

illusions!"

"I'm not doing a thing!" Andrew snapped. "The sign's talking!"

"No, it's not!" Bowser shouted.

Andrew threw his hands up. "I didn't say anything! You didn't say anything! Nobody on our team said anything-"

"C'mon!" the voice called out. "You're all staring right at me!"

"See?" said Andrew, walking up to the sign. "It's either the sign that's talking or the air itself."

"You're scaring me, Andrew," mumbled Ramona, following the Kruna of Shadow. The other Kruna trotted over to gather around the apparent talking sign.

"Hey, you guys know Mario, right?" the sign asked. "What's going on with you guys? My name's Bill Board!"

"You know Mario?" Bowser asked. "I've never heard of you, Bill Board."

"Nobody ever remembers me," Bill Board responded. "But that's alright!"

Ramona waved her hand and replied, "Hi, Bill Board! I'm Ramona!" Bowser and Warra exchanged puzzled looks with each other.

"Rad," Marut murmured. "This is... the coolest sign... ever."

"Alright; I'll bite," Bowser muttered. "Can you tell us some about-"

"Where you currently are and what's been happening around here as of late?" Bill Board finished.

"How did you know I was going to say that?"

"I'm a sign," Bill Board replied. "What other information would anyone want to ask me about? The weather?"

"Oh, that's just not right," Andrew blurted out with a laugh.

"Okay, so here's the deal," Bill Board said. "You're currently situated in the heart of the Birabuto Kingdom, one of the constituent kingdoms of Sarasaland. As you can see, it's pretty lifeless over here. In contrast, this used to be a lively region, but the population moved closer to the border with Castle Town as the deserts here became harsher over time. As of late, all sorts of creatures have started appearing throughout the area!"

"What kinds of creatures are we talking about?" Athelstan asked.

"Undead creatures," replied Bill Board. "Rumor has it that they're headed by the great and terrible King Boo, but you didn't hear that from me!"

"What?!" Andrew griped. "That bastard's here?" He unsheathed his Shadow Blades. "Where is he? I got a score to settle with him! We'll take care of him, no questions asked!"

"And run him and his croanies out of this kingdom!" Ramona added. "Although, this talk of undead creatures is making me just a *little* bit uneasy."

"Wait, what about Daisy?" Warra said as a reminder.

"Woah, woah, woah; timeout!" Bill Board cried out. "Don't get all excited! I haven't finished speaking words yet! I don't know anything about a Daisy, but I do know that daises aren't going to grow out in a desert! I also do know that two miles to the west of here, King Boo has set up a makeshift fortress underneath the Arbiter's Grounds just past the largest of the pyramids! You need to be careful – that ghost is a real ghoul!"

"Daisy can wait," Andrew demanded. "There's somebody here in this kingdom who obviously doesn't belong here, so we need to take executive action and get him out!"

"Oh, thank heavens," Bill Board sighed with relief. "Glad to know you guys'll be taking care of that huge spectre! All these creatures around here have been spooking me out!"

"Now hold on," said Warra. "Wasn't our whole premise for coming

here to give Daisy support?"

"We are," Bowser argued. "King Boo could very well be a threat to Sarasaland. We're helping her out by preventing him from causing any more trouble than he already has. What do you think he'll do once he's gathered enough of those undead creatures of his? Sit around and have a great big party? We can go join her after we settle things with King Boo."

"What about Kokoro?" Warra added in a fuss. "She could very well need our help against him! What if he beat us here? We know how treacherous he is!"

"But you remember how lopsided the fight became once Daisy unlocked her Nova Form, right?" asked Bowser. "I think she can handle him provided he didn't manage to get some increase in power in the last couple of weeks since our encounter with him."

"Or unless Daisy was somehow weakened in her time here," said Athestan. "But I don't see how either one could have happened!"

Warra let out a large sigh. "Fine. I guess you're right."

"If you guys don't mind, I'll be taking charge for this little escapade," Andrew asserted, already on the move for the tall pyramid in the distance. "C'mon, let's go! All of you!"

"Hey, don't go rushing off like that!" Ramona exlaimed, running to catch up to the Kruna of Shadow.

"Man, he really doesn't like King Boo, does he," Athelstan said under his breath.

"I don't blame him," Bowser remarked. "That ghost's an arrogant sociopath. I don't like Andrew's reckless attitude though – that's the last thing we need when dealing with King Boo and his crafty tricks."

"Listen without breaking focus and calm as I explain how to purify your first chakra," said Geno. "This first chakra, is your root chakra. It emanates from the sacrum of your spine outwards. Concentrate

your energies into this area, then tell me what you experience."

Daisy did as Geno instructed, directing a small portion of energy through to her root chakra. "I'm having a little bit of difficulty here. It's flowing, but it's like trying to drive a Wiggler through molasses."

"You have self-esteem issues," replied Geno. "Your confidence is remarkably high, but your self-esteem and self-worth leaves a lot to be desired. Tell me; have you felt ever felt, unimportant?"

"Well, yeah," Daisy muttered. "I've felt powerless and useless to Sarasaland for as long as I can remember. And then ever since I went to the Mushroom Kingdom, I've felt expendable and unnecessary there too. I try to stay by myself as often as I can. I really don't feel like I belong anywhere... like I'm not important to anybody..."

"That's not something you should be concerned with. You are important to you. You are valuable to you. You are not you, let alone alive, without you. Therefore, you are necessary to you. Don't just believe in yourself; believe in your worth. Ground yourself in the present and not the past. Not only then will you be *unfaltering* , but also *unshakable* as well."

Several minutes passed by, Geno awaiting patiently for the Kruna to complete her purification of her root chakra. She then looked up at Geno, appearing weary and tormented. "I... don't know if I can do this..." she murmured. She was starting to sweat despite the low temperatures and her lightweight clothing. "Can we move to a different chakra and come back to this one? Please?"

"Yes, most certainly," Geno responded. "I said that this training of ours would be relatively short, but I never said this would be an easy thing to do. Hopefully in purifying the other chakras, you can come to terms with your root chakra."

The pathway the Kruna trekked was spacious and lined with towers. It didn't take long for them to run into a band of a dozen Dry Bones scouring about. Once the elemental wielders were spotted, the Dry

Bones turned and converged on them.

"Athelstan – this is your terrain!" Ramona cried out.

"I thought sand would've been deferred to Daisy!" Marut shouted.

"Silicon dioxide," Athelstan replied. "Sand is inorganic, hence; MY MOVE!" He struck his Avalanche Spear into the ground, causing cascading blocks of sand to rumble towards the squadron of skeletal koopas. All the Dry Bones were smashed into pieces and launched into the air. The Kruna of Stone twirled his spear around as the broken bodies of the skeletons rained down on to the ground.

"Well, that was effective," Warra said.

"Personally, I prefer the mountains," stated Athelstan. "But I can work with deserts too."

"We should keep moving," Andrew asserted. "The Arbiter's Grounds are just up there." He pointed to the large building beside the even larger pyramid; a coliseum bordered and lined with even more towers.

"I never thought anyone would have built up a desert so much," muttered Bowser.

"But people used to live here, so it makes sense," Warra remarked.

The Kruna kept on their track towards the Arbiter's Grounds, but stopped once they heard rustling. They turned around and saw the Dry Bones slowly reforming and reassembling themselves. Within seconds, they were put together and trotting towards the Kruna once more, no worse from their prior experience with the sand.

"Oh, c'mon!" Athelstan hollered. "Let's try this again!" He jammed his Avalanche Spear into the ground again, but this time with the intention of removing the ground from beneath the Dry Bones. A deep, rectangular pit opened up underneath the Dry Bones and swallowed them. Athelstan then stomped his foot into the ground to close up the pit, effectively trapping the Dry Bones underneath the sand.

"Woah, sand burial, dude," said Marut. "You put those bones where they belong!"

"Alright, alright, alright!" Ramona rambled, pushing Andrew forward with great speed. "Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

"Easy!" Andrew yelled. "You're gonna burn out the soles in my shoes!"

"I don't care!" the Kruna of Light cried. "Just get inside the coliseum already!"

"I didn't think a couple of walking diagrams could freak somebody out so much," said Bowser.

The rest of the Kruna caught up with Ramona and Andrew and closed in on the Arbiter's Grounds. Ramona kept right behind Andrew, but then saw shadows dancing around on the ground. "Andrew, are you doing that?" she asked, gesturing to the mobile patches of darkness.

"It's just some Neckies," Andrew replied, pointing up to the sky. "Quit acting so paranoid!"

"I can't help it!" Ramona whined. She looked up at the nine thick vultures soaring overhead. They looked to be flying in a circular motion.

Andrew let out a heavy sigh and grabbed one of Ramona's hands. "You see a few undead things and you're on the fritz! Calm down; we're almost there."

"There's gotta be a word to describe a phobia of the undead," Bowser joked.

As the Kruna kept walking, Ramona kept her eyes down on the ground to track the shadows of the Neckies. She could have sworn those vultures were following them. Fifty yards downfield, the shadows of the Neckies actually appeared to be bigger and closer to the Kruna than before.

"Ow!" Andrew yelled. "Why are you crushing my hand, Ramona?!"

"Look up there!" snapped the Kruna of Light, pointing at the Neckies. "They're getting closer! They're following us!"

"You know, I shouldn't be finding this funny," commented Bowser. "But I am. And I am not sorry about that."

"They're just birds!" Andrew reasoned. "They're not out to get us!"

As if on cue, one of the Neckies shrieked and dove down at Warra. Marut threw his Gust Boomerangs at the creature to drive it away before it got too close. The Necky shrieked again and flew at Marut. Once the Kruna of Air caught his boomerangs, he threw them once more at the Necky, making contact and knocking the bird back a handful of yards. The Necky hovered in the air and cawed, calling his counterparts down to attack the Kruna. The elemental wielders dropped to the ground as the Neckies dove down in arcs.

"I told you!" Ramona yelled.

Marut whipped back to his feet and pulled out his Cyclone Ninjato. With a swing of his blade, a gust of wind emerged to blow away the pestering Neckies. Some distance away, the vultures decided not to pursue any longer and flew off in search of easier prey. The rest of the Kruna returned to their feet as Marut went to retrieve his boomerangs.

"Let's just keep going!" Andrew shouted with a frown. He was already on the move for the Arbiter's Grounds once again. The rest of the team followed close behind.

Soon, the Kruna were near the entry to the coliseum. There was no direct entrance on the ground level, though. A wide flight of stairs led into a pit with a narrow entryway. There was no other way in, and it didn't appear that anything of significance was in the coliseum field itself. No, the environment was now deathly quiet with no other sound than the breeze sifting the sandy landscape. They would have to traverse through the Arbiter's Grounds in subterranean fashion.

"That's our only way in," Warra murmured. "We're not going to be seeing daylight for a little while, it seems." Ramona gulped and

gripped onto Andrew's shirt, prompting the Kruna of Shadow to facepalm himself.

"Good thing you weren't around for our run at the Stone Shrine," Bowser said to the timid light wielder.

"We should go into the arena," suggested Marut. "It could be fun!"

"We're not here for fun!" responded Andrew. "We're looking for King Boo! Besides, it appears that we have to go under not just the arena but the entire coliseum."

Before any of the Kruna could make their way down the stairs, loud, heavy breathing became audible. Footsteps followed the breathing, at which point two sizable figures appeared from the entryway. They were decayed, humanoid bodies with piercing neon blue eyes and bones exposed in various places. They were zombies that lumbered up the stairs quicker than anyone would have expected.

"No no no no NO!" Ramona screamed, pulling out her Light Broadsword. Her blade lit up and fired off a laser of light energy that zapped one of the zombies through the torso. Although a brutal attack, it did nothing to slow the undead bodies down. The Kruna all backtracked away as the zombies came ever closer. Andrew rushed forward with his Shadow Blades and made a sliding double slash at the legs of one of the zombies, then vaulted out of his momentum to avoid the upper body of the undead figure from falling on top of him. Bowser activated his Blazer Claws and blocked some of the swings from the other zombie. The Kruna of Fire waited for an opening between the zombie's attacks and threw a slash at its neck, decapitating the head and causing the body to fall limp.

"Head comes off, they turn off!" Athelstan yelled.

"Then check that one!" Marut hollered. Since Andrew only took out the legs of the zombie he fought, its torso and head were still whole and attached, and it was dragging itself along the ground towards the Kruna of Shadow. Warra leapt forward and made a clean cut with one of his Aqua Axes to knock the head off of the remaining zombie.

"They're strong," said Warra.

"And fast," muttered Bowser. "Here's hoping we don't run into anymore of those while we're down there, or it might just be *our* heads the next time."

"I don't know if I wanna go in there now!" Ramona whimpered.

"We're not waiting for ya," said Andrew. "It's dim down there. I'll keep in front so I can use my night vision. That way, we'll be less likely to get ambushed." He made his way down the steps and into the entrance of the Arbiter's Grounds, followed by Bowser, then Athelstan, then Warra, and then Marut.

Ramona looked around at the eerie setting, feeling anxious and jittery. Then she did herself a disservice and looked down at the motionless zombie bodies. At that point, she decided she had about all she could stand. "Well don't leave me out here!" the Kruna of Light squealed, dashing to catch up to her team.

Purifying the second chakra came more easily for Daisy than did the first, but once again, she found difficulty with cleansing it. This chakra, located in the lower abdominal region, was associated with letting things go and with freedom of self-expression. She had no problem with expressing herself, and always made sure that she stayed true to who she was no matter what someone else said or did. Whatever she wanted to do, she did. The problem came with letting go of past troubles. Three issues kept cropping up in her mind, acting as a great source of frustration; her parents' restrictive, abusive, and controlling nature over her, Mario and Luigi's exclusion of her from all of their quests, and all the deaths – including Master Terran's death – that were caused by the sadistic Soul Stealer, Kokoro. Geno told her that letting go of two of those issues would be sufficient. "It is not the act of letting go as much as it is having the ability to let go," he had said, but Daisy could not muster enough within her to let go of even one.

Or can I? Daisy thought. *I'm helping out the world with my actions now; I'm putting my efforts towards a greater good, so what*

difference does it make if Mario and Luigi let me come on their adventures? I have my own quests, and my own team, and my own missions, and quite frankly, I believe I'm doing things better than they are! And Grekka, you suffered because you didn't let go of your troubles; you suffered because you held a grudge against a society that did you wrong. I've come so close to falling off that cliff that you yourself ventured off of, and I'll still fall off if I let myself succumb to the rage and hate I feel towards my mother and father. Forget everything that happened – I'm not here to get revenge for anything, Dad. I'm here to save Sarasaland from you! You're an evil person who's a threat to the world!

An orange glow overtook Daisy's body for a few moments. The Kruna of Earth stared at her body in awe with a sense of enlightenment and spiritual growth. The glow then faded, but her eyes remained wide with amazement.

"Excellent, Sarasa," Geno praised. "You have now demonstrated detachment. With detachment, you can prevent angst and repression from building up within you. Such things can cause a blockage of energy flow that can disrupt more than just your life force. You can't hold on to everything – detach when there is too much. Six more chakras remain, Sarasa, so let us continue."

Chapter XII

Thunder Under the Birabuto Kingdom :

"The third chakra that you must purify is your solar plexus chakra," said Geno. "This chakra deals with your simple emotions over the more complex ones. It pulses from your upper abdomen. Cleansing this chakra may have the most significant impact on your ability to also cleanse your root chakra because of this one simple question you have to ask yourself."

"And what is that?" asked Daisy.

"Do you love yourself?"

Daisy started scowling. "I hate that word, that damned L-word – except for when in reference to flowers, though. I love flowers! I'd marry a bouquet of them if I could-"

"Focus, Daisy," said Geno. "This is serious."

"Sorry, but, that's a large request to have to ask. I mean, I don't think I even heard that L-word from my mom or dad..."

"You have to be able to accept yourself for who you are, past, present, and future, in order to cleanse this chakra. Love yourself and who you are, for you belong in this world, even if you haven't realized it."

"I just... don't really care about myself enough to do so," Daisy responded. "And every time you mention that word, I cringe."

"In a way, you are a flower, are you not?" Geno reasoned. "A self-sufficient flower, perhaps. You survive because you just barely do enough to keep yourself alive. You have looked seriously depleted ever since I first encountered you, almost as if you could wilt away at a moment's notice. If it wasn't for your will, you would have very well collapsed long ago and would have never stood back up."

"And my *will* will keep me going!"

"Until your body can't keep up with the demands that you continue to place upon it and you fail against someone you could have otherwise beaten. The flowers, trees, and assorted organisms in this sanctuary have a kind of will that we can't understand, and yet they still eventually falter..."

Daisy clenched her jaw, unable to debate any further. She could not deny the lack of care she gave herself. With barely any recovery since the battle against Elkon, she was liable to get picked-off by whoever would not have been powerful enough to wipe her off the face of the Earth had she allowed herself the recovery and care to return to full health. As beaten, battered, and bruised as she was, what position was she in to be able to make any difference in Sarasaland, let alone the rest of the world?

"It's not a sin to care for others more than you do yourself," said Geno. "That is actually an ideal mindset to have. The world would be a much better place if everyone could share the same compassion, respect, and empathy that you harbor, but you're putting it to use at the expense of your own well-being to the point where you're becoming an even greater enemy to yourself than you may have previously been. You have to start caring about yourself. In doing so, you can let others show you the same kind of good will that you have shown them, in turn strengthening your bonds. If you don't care about yourself, you won't survive much longer, and you won't be able to protect and help others."

The hallways of the Arbiter's Grounds were narrow. Few torches lined the walls, making for a very dim environment. Andrew kept to the front to take advantage of his night vision, wishing that Daisy was there to take advantage of hers too. Instead, Ramona stayed at the back with her Light Broadsword out and lit up to act as a glow stick. This was not as efficient as having Daisy's eyes because Ramona's light dramatically increased the chances of attention being drawn to them. Not two minutes into the coliseum basement had they gone before a growl echoed through the halls. All the Kruna had their tools out and were prepared for a worst-case

scenario in the low-light, closed-in environment of limited space.

A zombie emerged from one of the corridors and hobbled towards the Kruna. Athelstan stepped out and put his Stone Shield up to block the zombie's swipes, then took off the head of the figure with his spear. Another zombie followed from the same corridor, prompting Athelstan to repeat the process he just completed. With two lifeless, decaying bodies on the ground, the Kruna continued through the hallways.

"How are you doing back there, Ramona?" Andrew whispered.

"I'm okay, I think," Ramona replied, her breath shallow and her eyes darting in every direction.

Marut looked up. "Wouldn't it be messed up if the ceiling came crashing down on us!"

"SHUT UP!" Ramona shrieked.

Ramona's screaming awakened a myriad of guttural sounds from various directions. With seven available corridors at their current location, those sounds could have came from anywhere. Turns out they came from *everywhere* as assortments of zombies and Dry Bones rushed through the labyrinth-like halls towards the Kruna. With a handful of well placed strikes from Marut and Bowser and a burst of light from Ramona, the zombies where reduced to piles of flesh and bone. The Dry Bones were dismantled by Warra, and Andrew, but it was only a matter of time before they reassembled themselves. The Kruna regrouped so Athelstan could pull some of the ground up and create a barrier to prevent the Dry Bones from following them.

Further trekking through the corridors led into the first open area within the dungeon that was not cramped. Strangely enough, it looked like a spacious harbor on a river that was without water. Even more disconcerting was the fact that there was a small ship floating above the bottomless river that led into a tunnel of equal darkness. There wasn't any other path to take.

"Maybe we should turn back," Ramona mumbled.

"Hey, I already made the barrier," said Athelstan. "The only way to go is where we haven't been yet."

The Kruna of Light started twiddling her fingers. "Well, I mean, you see, there's no ground for us to use to go through that tunnel, and none of us can fly, so-"

Andrew leapt onto the ship, causing the vessel to activate and give off a faint, orange glow. "Doesn't look like we need any ground."

The rest of the Kruna hopped aboard, though Bowser grabbed hold of the hesitant Ramona and brought her onto the ship when she showed apprehension. The ship started through the void that made up the river and towards the tunnel that would have likely led deeper into the underground dungeon. Unfortunately for the Kruna, it was slow, moving at a pace of barely a yard per second.

"I hope nobody gets nothing-sick," Andrew said after looking off the edge of the ship.

"How far do you think it goes down?" Athelstan wondered aloud. Marut leaned over and spat off the side of the ship. Everyone tried to listen for a sound but heard nothing.

"That's stupid," muttered Bowser. "How are you supposed to hear something that small?"

Athelstan pulled a mound from the stone floor of the harbor and directed it straight down into the chasm off the same side of the ship Marut spat off of. The rock shot down with exceptional quickness. After several moments passed, still no sound was audible.

"And the moral of the story here is don't fall off a ship," Andrew declared.

Six Dry Bones fell from the ceiling just before the ship entered the tunnel and engaged each of the Kruna in battle. The skeletons were strong but fragile and were not too much of a struggle to combat. While the other Kruna dismantled the Dry Bones they fought, Warra struck his opponent with the brunt of his axes and pushed the skeleton off the ship.

"What?" Warra yelled, glancing around at the piles of bones on the ship. "No! Just push them off!"

Marut blew a short burst of wind from his blade to sweep the bones away, yet one pile managed to reform before falling off the ship. Andrew leapt forward to ram the remaining skeletal form off the vessel, bashing it off but allowing himself to drift too close to the edge. Off the ship he flipped to the horror of the other Kruna. No one heard a sound.

Heart racing and face turning red, Ramona dashed to the edge and peered down. Relief overcame her when she saw that Andrew had managed to stab both of his Shadow Blades into the side of the ship. The Kruna of Light held out her hands to her shadow counterpart, who pulled himself up from his blades to latch onto her. The others relaxed when they saw Ramona pulling Andrew up off the edge of the ship. Ramona then tapped into the advanced ability of light wielders, telekinesis, to pull Andrew's tools from out of the ship and return them to his hands.

"Awesome, thanks," Andrew said, slapping fives with the now cheery Kruna of Light.

"First time we've seen that from you, Ramona," Bowser remarked.

"Too hard to use in combat," replied Ramona. "Probably the hardest advanced technique of any element to pull off, actually, in battle or not. It's a lot more limited than you would originally believe."

"Now can you just be more careful next time?" Bowser snapped at Andrew. "I get we're in a mausoleum, but we're not trying to add to it!"

"Yeah!" Marut hollered. "We're tryna 'put the *dead* guys back in the mausoleum!' Right? Right?" He looked around at his teammates who gave no responses. "Are you telling me you guys don't remember that? That was like the best show back then!"

"Oh yeah! That's right," Athelstan said. "I miss that show, man! It was too smart for its time!"

"Guys, let's just focus on getting to King Boo!" Andrew demanded.

"And then get out of this house of dead things!" added Ramona.

"Yes; this is not the place to be nostalgic about some show!" Bowser shouted. "Especially considering that aside from Andrew, our sense of sight in here is next to nothing!"

Up until they entered the tunnel, the dungeon had scattered torches and lightstones lit, but the tunnel itself had no such accommodations. Ramona reactivated her Light Broadsword to illuminate the ship as the vessel continued down through the tunnel. To add to the glow, Bowser flared his Blazer Claws to act as torches. Still, the light generated only worked on the ship itself and did nothing to reveal anything about the surrounding area. The Kruna had no idea where the ship was heading, and none of them were aware of the thirteen Boos and the Boolossus that followed the ship under the concealment of the darkness.

"While those two fools are playing with energy, I'm putting mine to use and taking out King Sarasa," Neva grumbled to herself. "You want something done, don't let somebody else do it."

The ice wielder dashed down the path, nearing the gates to Castle Town. Once the entrance was within eyesight, she cut to the side and concealed herself in the shrubbery. Neva checked her Frost Crossbow to ensure it was functioning at full capacity and then strapped it across her back. No one bats an eye at any tool that's put away, visible or not, but an unlimbered tool at ready would draw attention quick.

Through the entrance Neva went, and into the lively parade of afternoon commoners she marched. To her luck, no one seemed to pick up on who she was or remember that she was on the stage with Daisy at Sarasaland State University. *This just makes it all the more easier and faster for me,* Neva thought with a dirty smirk. *King Sarasa is more likely to be in the Central Castle than anywhere else, so I'll check there. I should try and find his T-29s while I'm here. They have to be in the Central Castle's armory. If I can't destroy*

them myself, at least I'll know where they are...

Neva's disgust arose once more as she trekked closer and closer to the Central Castle, taking note of the ever increasing wealth and quality of the Castle Town neighborhoods in relation to its proximity to her destination. The sight and gross disparity of economic distribution infuriated her and gave her more incentive to get to the Central Castle and erase King Sarasa from the planet once and for all. *Then, I'll set my sights on Marissa,* Neva mused. *But hopefully, I'll have unlocked the secrets of the Nova Form for myself so that I won't have to rely on that pitiable Sarasa-born earth wielder.*

Soon, she was at the stairs leading into the Central Castle. No guards were present outside, so now was a prime opportunity to not only enter the castle but to not draw attention from civilians the way she would if she had to confront authority figures. Oddly enough, a quick scan of the area showed that there was an absence of citizens as well.

"Confused?" a familiar voice called out. "Obviously, the King's not here. The Central Castle is always closed whenever the King is out of town."

I'm being watched! Neva screamed in thought. She turned around and saw Marissa floating in the air behind her, stretched out atop her broom. Neva was quick on the draw of her crossbow, but Marissa was equal in swiftness and froze the incoming ice arrows in midair with a swipe of her mystically charged hand. The arrows fell to the ground and shattered.

"He is at the Great Canyon in Muda Kingdom," said Marissa, not acknowledging Neva's attack. "He'll probably be there for a few days at the very least." She then pointed to her active Malocchio Eye. "Proof of my knowledge."

"How did you know I was looking for the King?" Neva questioned.

"What else would you be heading to the central castle for?" was Marissa's response. "You're wasting your time here."

"Why would he be in the Muda Kingdom then?"

"That's where he keeps those T-29 Remodeling Devices of his, obviously."

Neva's expression intensified. "Oh really?"

"King Sarasa does not keep the T-29s in the Central Castle," stated Marissa. "The armory here is far too small, and independent of that, having the devices in the city would raise unwanted suspicion and conspiracy that would be a threat to his rule. So he has a second, greater armory hidden in the Great Canyon. He's got his best scientists and engineers down there, probably working on making more T-29s as we speak – along with whatever the hell else he's demanding to be created."

"And why are you telling me this?" Neva asked, grinning with cockiness.

"Why not?" Marissa responded with comparable arrogance. "What am I *supposed* to do in the meantime while he's gone? Arson? Manslaughter? Loitering? Been there, done that, and way more."

"That didn't answer my question," the ice wielder grumbled.

"Those T-29s of his have to be dealt with at some point, you know," Marissa said. "Do me this one service before I kill you, because the next time I see you, well, you can figure it out." The demon witch's broom carried her high up into the sky after she finished talking. Once high over Castle Town, she rocketed off into the distance.

"That sounds like a trap," Neva muttered. "But then again, it also sounds like an opportunity. Now I'm definitely gonna need some help for this..."

The ship transported the Kruna further down through the tunnel and into a harbor that mimicked a larger version of the previous one. Once the ship reached solid ground, the Kruna disembarked and stepped foot on the pier. Bowser cooled his tools the moment he saw that torches and lightstones were along the walls once more.

"So, what about the arena?" asked Marut.

"We're *not* going to the arena!" snapped Andrew. "Just follow me!" He led the Kruna up the pier into a large, spacious area in the room that cut off the waterless, bottomless river and branched out into five separate hallways.

"We need to be careful," Ramona whispered. "I've seen this before in movies – anytime the group gathers in the center of a suspiciously large room with several hallways, they're ambushed, but as long as they're not in the middle, they're fine! So everyone just needs to-" She paused and looked down at her feet and saw that her and her team were all standing around the emblem that marked the center of the room.

"We need to do what now?" asked a clueless Marut.

The ground around the Kruna began to rumble and shift as a couple dozen Dry Bones dug themselves up. Mummies trotted out from the halls, totaling near fifty, and assembled behind the skeletal koopas. Surrounded, the Kruna huddled together with their weapons at ready, sure that they'd be able to handle the amount of enemies. That sureness weakened once a legion of Boos leaked from the walls around them.

"Why do I say anything..." Ramona mumbled to herself.

"We make our stand here!" Warra shouted to his teammates. He charged his Aqua Axes with his elemental energy and braced for combat.

"Nothing else we can do here, now is there?" said Bowser, igniting his Blazer Claws. "The only thing that would make this worse is if there were a ton of Goombas charging into the room."

Andrew intensified the dark energy around his Shadow Blades. "I hope you're being sarcastic, Bowser!"

"I don't know, fearless leader!" asked Bowser. "Why would we ever need to stop and think about where we're going when we can just rush headlong into everything?!"

With mummies, Dry Bones, and Boos coming from all directions, the

Kruna prepared themselves for a massive, brutal clash. And even as the undead creatures began advancing to attack, more of them filed in from the halls. There seemed to be no end to them, and within seconds, the Kruna were going to be swarmed.

Mom, Dad, Uncle, Marut brooded in thought as he gripped his Cyclone Ninjato. *I might be joining you soon...*

"Halt!" a ghastly voice demanded. The creatures all stopped their forward progress just as they were about to pounce on the elemental wielders, who looked up and saw King Boo fazing through the ceiling. His macabre, open-mouthed grin faded fast when he realized who had infiltrated the Arbiter's Grounds.

"I remember you guys," King Boo grumbled. "What are you doing here? Stop following me!"

"Get outta here!" Andrew yelled. "This kingdom's not yours to take!"

"Um, yes it is!" King Boo rebutted. "By order of Lord Marissa Arkana, the Birabuto Kingdom is mine!"

"Lord Marissa Arkana?" Athelstan repeated in question. "I thought King Sarasa was in charge of Sarasaland?"

"Not for long!" the royal spectre replied. "The king has no idea what's in store for him! Besides, who do you think you are trying to involve yourself in the geopolitical process and decisions around here? You're just a bunch or anarchists!"

"We're Kruna for your information!" Bowser shouted.

"Kruna?" King Boo spat out. "You done gone soft, Bowser! I expected better from you! But now you're just a goody two-shoes like the rest of these bums! Too bad! I should turn you all over to Marissa right now and get me a fortune!"

"Ramona! I need you to fire as much of your light energy at me as you can!" Bowser ordered.

"Wait, what?" Ramona sputtered. "You'll get fried!"

"No I won't," Bowser said. "I have an idea – just trust me!"

"You really should, light wielder!" taunted King Boo. "I'm sure death is a far better fate than whatever Marissa has planned for captives! You can at least save your friend from the demon witch!"

"C'mon, Ramona!" shouted Bowser. "We don't have time!"

"Hey, Lightbulb!" King Boo called out.

"Who? Me?" responded Ramona, trembling in place.

King Boo pointed at the largest and widest of the corridors in which ghoulish, otherworldly cackling and gurgling could be heard. "You see that hallway there? You wanna know what's down that hallway? You don't wanna know what's down that hallway." Spooked to the spine, Ramona shook her head in agreement. King Boo then asked, "You see that pile of bodies over there?" as he pointed to a pile of dead, rotting bodies pushed up against one of the corners of the room. "You wanna know what put those bodies there?" Ramona clenched her teeth and nodded, but then King Boo shook his head and said, "You don't wanna know what put those bodies there," to which Ramona shook her head in turn with terrorized compliance.

"Don't listen to him!" Andrew said to the Kruna of Light. "He's just trying to scare you!"

"I'm just stating truths," King Boo replied. "I'm enlightening her to the attractions of this place."

"Although, I am a little frightened," Ramona barely managed to say. Gesturing with her hands, she added, "Just a little."

"RAMONA!" shouted Bowser. "What are you waiting for? Just do it!"

Ramona kept quivering and whimpering for a little while, wilting under the culminating pressure until she finally screamed and let loose a massive wave of light from her broadsword at the Kruna of Fire. Bowser opened up his palms and focused flames through them in a manner that allowed him to collect all of the incoming light in between his hands. As more energy flowed, he had to expand his hold and spread his hands further apart. Once Ramona stopped,

Bowser had a dense orb of light trapped in his grasp.

"What the hell is this..." King Boo muttered.

"Okay, thank you, Ramona," Bowser grunted, smiling yet struggling to keep control of the mass of energy. Not a single soul was prepared for what the Koopa King did next. He channeled more fire through the shining spheroid of light and allowed the two elements to mix together. Once this task was complete, he flared the flames around him, causing the light to flow and outline his form. The properties of the flames initiated a brilliant rainbow strobe-effect around Bowser that lasted even as the fires receded and faded away.

"What the hell is this?!" King Boo asked again.

"What..." Marut stuttered. "What did he just do?"

"I've never seen this before!" said Ramona.

"I don't even know if this has ever happened before!" Athelstan hollered. "Not the way Bowser's doing it, that's for sure!"

Rainbow Bowser bolted from his spot and ran into the assembled enemies like a raging bullet bill at triple speed. The Kruna of Fire mowed over the mummies and Dry Bones bunch by bunch, alternating between ramming maneuvers and using his Whirling Fortress technique to jet up into the air and knock off the floating Boos. The Dry Bones rammed by Rainbow Bowser were not only dismantled, but shattered, and therefore unable to reassemble themselves.

"Okay," said King Boo. "First – what. Second – THE HELL?! You're turning my precious underground fortress into an EDM club with your rainbowy flashing!"

Bowser continued bulldozing through the extensive number of enemies until the light given to him from Ramona diminished and wore out. Once the last of the rainbow faded, Bowser returned to normal and took back his previous position alongside his teammates. His efforts were sufficient enough to destroy all the

enemies in the room but three Boos and King Boo himself.

"Genius, Bowser!" Warra praised.

"Alright, you guys asked for it!" King Boo cried out with a red face. "That was entirely UNCALLED FOR!"

"That maneuver totaled all of my energy," Bowser said in between breaths and pants. "Sorry guys, I got nothing left after that!"

"That's cool, 'cause I'm taking that clown with a crown anyways!" Andrew asserted.

"So you came back for more, huh?" boasted King Boo. "Good! Your clothes are not gonna be the only things black and purple after this, Shady! Here's hoping that lady friend of yours over there doesn't have to bail you out this time!" He pointed towards the ceiling, at which time the Kruna felt a jolt. The emblem underneath the elemental wielders' feet ripped free from the ground and carried them up to the splitting ceiling. For the first time in a while, they saw sunlight as they ascended higher up through the expanding opening on their way out of the dungeon. King Boo followed from underneath and phased through the ceiling to meet the Kruna at the top.

Chapter XIII

Battle in the Birabuto Coliseum :

The platform took the Kruna all the way up to the surface, but not just anywhere above ground – they were brought to the center of the coliseum arena of the Arbiter's Grounds. Once level with the surface, the platform locked into place to plug the opening through which they entered. The coliseum was barren, but looked like a very popular attraction in the past. The arena itself resembled a multi-purpose field, able to house a variety of sports and events, but the grass had since died out and was reduced to nothing but sand and patchy areas of brown turf remnants.

Andrew glared at Marut. "Are you happy now?" The Kruna of Air nodded and grinned in response.

King Boo passed through the ground and headed for the observation deck. "Welcome to Birabuto Coliseum! The abandoned sports arena that makes up part of the present-day Arbiter's Grounds! Let's get to our opening event!"

The Kruna's stares shifted over in the direction in which King Boo pointed. The gates to an expansive tunnel at the western end of the arena parted to the sides, giving way to a gigantic Pokey nearly four times the size of Bowser and Athelstan combined both in height and mass. It shifted its way out of the tunnel and into the arena like a sandy colossus.

"Behold! Grandmaster Pokey!" howled King Boo.

"Coward!" Andrew called out at the ghost. "Come down here and face me like a man... spirit... Boo!"

"How about you take a piece of this!" King Boo snapped, charging a spheroid of corrupted shadows. Andrew cringed at the sight of the mixture of black, bright red, and sickly green that comprised King Boo's dark energy. It was a fast-moving attack once the spectre launched it at the Kruna of Shadow, though it was not indefensible.

With his Shadow Blades, Andrew caught the crackling sphere of tainted darkness and slashed through it. Warra could have sworn he heard shrieking the moment Andrew dispelled King Boo's attack.

"It's people like you that give the shadows a bad name!" Andrew yelled. "It's people like you that are the reason the shadows have the stigma associated with them that they have!" He turned to his teammates with the utmost intensity. "If somebody could handle the mighty smiling cactus over there, that would be great! I'm taking King Boo!"

"Bowser!" Athelstan shouted, glancing at the Koopa King. He intended to call him to tag-team against the Grandmaster Pokey, but forgot that Bowser had no energy leftover to spare. "Oh, right, nevermind. C'mon, Warra!"

Bowser, Andrew, Ramona, and Marut backed off and leapt away to give Warra and Athelstan space. With the Grandmaster Pokey moving closer, the two water and stone wielders got into stance to face-off against the colossal, sentient plant. However the battle would turn out, the Birabuto Coliseum was about to get its first action in a long time.

Geno gave Daisy all the time she needed. He sat across from her in silence, allowing the Kruna of Earth the opportunity to meditate on purifying her solar plexus chakra. She kept her gaze fixated on a single blade of dewy grass while she scoured the depths of her body, heart, mind, and spirit.

I should've let the other Kruna come with me , Daisy thought. *That was entirely selfish of me. They wanted to be here with me and help me, but I wouldn't let them. I just shut everybody out because I don't want to be shut out myself. I've closed myself off and remained distant because it never felt like anyone thought I was important, and I never felt important to them either. But, I can't be important if I'm not around to be in anyone's lives, I can't die before I've done all that I've set out to do.*

Daisy broke from her muse and looked up, expecting a new glow to

overtake her body and new energies to arise and circulate from the clearing of impurities disrupting the solar plexus chakra, but it was not so. Geno did not show surprise nor did he show contempt. A blank expression remained plastered on his face and looked to stay there for as long as Daisy was going to spend with the task bestowed on her. Even so, he noticed confusion from the beastly human and asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Why didn't anything happen this time?" Daisy asked. "I thought I came to a realization. I thought I did, but I guess not..."

"Obviously, you didn't fulfill the requirements then," was Geno's answer. "The purification of your third chakra requires that you have to accept yourself for who you are and acknowledge your importance to the world and in the grand scheme of things, but you won't be able to truly do either one until you show compassion and affection for yourself. I'll avoid the L-word as per your wishes, but that doesn't change what you must do."

"I guess I'll have to save this one for later too," the earth wielder murmured. "One-for-three; those aren't good numbers..."

"It seems you won't be able to cleanse your first or third chakra by themselves," Geno said. "You'll likely have to concentrate on a simultaneous purification of them both."

"That's disappointing," Daisy grumbled.

"The disappointment only falls on you," replied Geno. "You have done that yourself. I am only here as guidance and counsel. You're the only one getting in your way, so I ask, why are you?"

"It's a giant sand thing!" Athelstan hollered. "Warra, just water it out!"

Warra raised an eyebrow. "Unless you want me to exhaust all my energy before we even had a chance to count the spikes on that thing, that's not feasible! Did you forget the lack of moisture out here in the desert?"

"Oh yeah," mumbled the Kruna of Stone. "I kinda wish I had my

halberd back just for this, but I can manage!" He stomped his foot into the ground, twirled around his Avalanche Spear, and jammed the implement down in front of him. Various blocks of the sandy, dry ground snapped up and created mounds ahead of the two elemental warriors, two of these mounds managing to ram into the Grandmaster Pokey. Thanks to Athelstan's maneuver, the bottom-most of the nine segments of the Pokey was pummeled. Unfortunately, that would prove to accomplish nothing. The Grandmaster Pokey absorbed the mounds that Athelstan kicked up to replace the mass lost from its battered body segment.

"Well I feel ineffective right about now," Athelstan muttered.

"How do you think I feel?" Warra called out, darting forward at the Pokey. Running as fast as he could towards the slow-moving cactus creature, he headed for its base segment and brought both of his Aqua Axes around from the right to land, clean, thick slashes through the sandy form. He repeated from the left and then once more from the right, landing enough damage to cause the Grandmaster Pokey's base segment to crumble apart. Eight sections of the sentient cactus remained. Warra leapt back to Athelstan and to the side to flank his stone counterpart.

"Good going," said Athelstan. "Let's do that for the remaining segments!"

"We'll alternate swings!" Warra replied as he rushed towards Grandmaster Pokey again. Athelstan followed the Kruna of Water from behind with the head of his spear up and ready. Suddenly, the Grandmaster Pokey began shaking, creating tremors in the ground emanating a small radius from its body. Warra and Athelstan stopped dead in their tracks and watched the Pokey pull together the ground underneath itself to reassemble a new body segment.

"Birabuto Kingdom," Bowser grumbled. "Land of the stubborn mooks that refuse to go down. Really, a Pokey should not be that hard to defeat! I don't care how big it is!"

"Really?" Athelstan shot back. "So why aren't you up here standing against it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" replied a condescending Kruna of Fire. "I mean, I only just burnt off all of my energy bailing you guys out of dawn of the dead!"

"Let's just attack again!" Warra asserted.

"No, Warra!" Athelstan yelled. "That's not gonna work!"

"Obviously!" Warra snapped. "But that's all I can think of at the moment! What do you want to do – just stand around? It'll flatten us and put us in sand coffins!"

"That's all *you* can think of?" Athelstan asked. "Man, that's when you know we're in some deep crap right about now."

"Man, for Kruna, you guys aren't that good, are you?" King Boo said with disappointment. "You got me all worked up for nothing. You're not even worth taking back to Marissa!"

"Just wait 'til I get my hands on you!" Andrew screamed.

King Boo shrugged. "At this rate, I won't even have to come down there."

Warra and Athelstan both backtracked towards their teammates to create space between them and the Grandmaster Pokey. Their situation appeared to be a losing one, seeing as how their enemy could not only reconstruct itself but build replacement portions of itself. The Grandmaster Pokey shuffled ever closer, neither Warra nor Athelstan able to come up with any adequate retaliation.

"Tag-in! Tag-in! Tag-in!" Marut urged. "Warra! Athelstan! Put me in!"

"Alright," Athelstan said, marching over to the other Kruna. "I hope you got something good up your sleeve!"

The first move Marut made was chucking his Gust Boomerangs. The projectiles cut through the air, but bounced off of the Grandmaster Pokey and made minimal damage. As Marut caught his boomerangs, the Pokey was already replacing its lost sand.

"Get back to the side," Athelstan muttered, coming forward again.

Marut stuffed his hand into Athelstan's waist to stop his progress. "No no no! I got this!" He got set to toss his boomerangs again, but this time tapped into the power of air to add rippling gale-force winds to their rotation as he threw them. The combination made the boomerangs mimic shuriken as they made their way towards the Pokey, and had sufficient enough force to rip free one of the middle sections of its body. Disconnected and hurled some several dozen yards from the rest of the Pokey, the body segment lost its form and scattered across the side of the arena floor. The top half of the Grandmaster Pokey slammed down and joined with its bottom half.

It was then that Ramona got an idea. "Destroy the sections, then let Marut blow them away with a gust of wind!" she shouted. "Quickly!"

Warra charged at the Grandmaster Pokey and laid multiple slashes on the bottom body section, then cut to the side for Marut to release his Gust Boomerangs enhanced with intense winds to blast away the remains of the sandy segment. Warra and Marut repeated this process three more times, reducing the colossal Pokey down to three sections, including the head. Just before Warra could initiate the offensive again, the Grandmaster Pokey trembled and fired off the spikes from its body. Marut and Warra both were clipped by the projectiles and knocked to the ground, giving enough of an opportunity for the Pokey to build two body segments back up from underneath itself.

"It's still not working!" Athelstan shouted.

"That's fine!" Ramona said. "We just need a large enough window for us to be able to destroy the head! Marut, Warra – now! Before it rebuilds back to full size! Watch the spikes!"

The Grandmaster Pokey, although it did not rebuild another section of its body, did create new spikes that it pushed through its form to replace the ejected ones. Warra and Marut went back to work, the Kruna of Water hacking at the body segments and the Kruna of Air launching his boomerangs to blow away the destroyed sections. Once more, the Pokey fired off its spikes, but Warra put up his axes to block and Marut evaded with his air wielder agility. After a hard grind, the Grandmaster Pokey was down to its head and a single extra body segment. With the opportunity shining, Marut took out his

Cyclone Ninjato and sent lightning through the shaft of the blade to shock and jolt the Pokey's head. To his surprise, his lightning shot clear through the head of the sentient cactus. The remainder of the Grandmaster Pokey's body fell apart and crashed to the ground, kicking up a thick sand wave that spread in all directions. Marut thrust his blade forward to create a draft of wind to protect him and the other Kruna from the incoming burst of sand. Once everything on the coliseum floor settled, the Grandmaster Pokey was no more and did not reform.

"Alright!" Ramona cheered, hopping up and down.

"Don't you start cheering!" taunted King Boo. "That still took way too long for you guys to defeat a rather pedestrian adversary!"

The gate opposite the one the Grandmaster Pokey entered from opened. From within came the squadron of Boos that had been following the Kruna from the beginning of their ship ride along with the mighty Boolossus. The thirteen Boos hovered close to the colossal spectre as they made their way to the field to confront the Kruna.

"Beware the Boolossus!" howled King Boo. "Froth at your mouths with fear!"

"Oh man, not these ghosts again," Ramona said with a shudder.

"Relax; they're more scared of you than you are of them!" said Bowser. "Now as far as the big one, I'm not so certain..."

"I'm tagging-in, Warra," said Andrew. "I'm gonna demonstrate why King Boo should be the one scared!"

"All you'll demonstrate is your lack of power and skill!" boasted King Boo.

With Warra backing off, Andrew and Marut stood against the Boos and Boolossus. The Kruna of Air had his boomerangs at the ready, anticipating multiple Boos to come charging at him at once. Instead, the Boos seemed to be on the defensive and awaiting attacks from the two elemental wielders. The Boolossus was doing the same as

the Boos.

"They're not gonna do anything until we do something first," said Andrew. "Cover me!"

Without another word, Andrew bolted towards the Boolossus, readying his Shadow Blades with elemental energy. He laid out his tools to land a smashing slash on the giant ghost, only to find that he swiped through an after image. The group of Boos scattered to opposite ends of the arena and all started chuckling and cackling at the Kruna of Shadow.

"Where'd he go?" Andrew shouted.

"Where *didn't* he go!" King Boo hollered.

Boolossus appeared directly behind Andrew and zapped him on the back with a heated burst of darkness, knocking him several feet away along the ground underneath the incessant laughing of the Boos. Marut grabbed his boomerangs and hurled them at Boolossus, but the spectre had created another afterimage and was gone by the time the projectiles reached him. Some distance away, Andrew snapped back to his feet, but before he could survey the area, Boolossus was behind him again! And again came another bolt of shadow, this one more powerful than the last, to send Andrew tumbling halfway to the other side of the coliseum floor. Marut took aim with his boomerangs once more, but Boolossus was gone before the Kruna of Air could even throw one.

"What's Wrong?" taunted King Boo. "You couldn't see him from behind?"

"He was BEHIND ME!" shouted Andrew in a fit. He launched himself off the ground and into the air, anticipating Boolossus to appear behind him again. Andrew saw Boolossus appear towards the ground but disappear as quickly as he came.

He's gonna appear from behind again! Andrew thought. And sure enough, he twisted around at the height of his ascent in time to see Boolossus staring him dead in the eyes with another spheroid of darkness ready to strike him down. To evade, the Kruna of Shadow

made a wicked spin to the side and followed with a few quick somersaults to propel him back down to the ground faster. Boolossus' attack missed and went straight into the ground thanks to the shadow wielder's reflexes, but that didn't stop the massive ghost from taking off in pursuit. Tapping his feet on the ground, Andrew made a sharp cut to the right, then another sharp cut to the left, then a hard curve in the same direction, then a series of dashes and cuts in randomized directions with precision and speed. Unfortunately for him, the Kruna all saw Boolossus follow their shadow teammate with *exact* tracking.

"He's definitely the Shadow Shifter!" commented Athelstan. "But that's not helping him out here! He's better off saving that stuff for soccer!"

"Damn, it's like watching a Cosmic Clone!" Bowser said. "Boolossus must be trying to ram into him!"

As he kept moving, Andrew made several peaks back at his dedicated pursuer. "Shoot! He's right behind me!" he growled. "I'm getting careless!"

Marut stood, trying to aim and get a shot of lightning off on Boolossus, but Andrew's movements were making it difficult. The other Boos were content with surveying the action and stayed in their spots hovering around the sides of the coliseum. They saw no need to insert themselves seeing as how Boolossus was in complete control.

"I can't shake this guy!" shouted Andrew, making another cut. He twirled out of his maneuver to fire off a bolt of shadow behind him, expecting to surprise Boolossus with a quick strike. Instead, Boolossus demonstrated efficient reflexes of his own and batted the burst of darkness back at the backwards-running Kruna of Shadow. Andrew brought up his blades to deflect the attack back at Boolossus, only for the blast to faze through another afterimage. The surrounding Boos went into an uproar of applause.

"Move it!" Ramona screamed. "He's behind you again!"

"Oh C'MON!" Andrew growled, leaping into the air. "Take a shot,

Marut!"

"I'm trying!" Marut hollered back, ninjato unsteady. "But you guys are making it really hard! Try and be predictable, because being unpredictable's not working!"

After making a short display of aerial agility, Andrew touched back down to the ground and kept on the move with Boolossus keeping right with him. It was only a matter of time before Andrew was going to get tired. Marut had to act quick and get off at least one shot, even if only to see how Boolossus would react to it. Knowing he'd just be stalling if he waited any longer, Marut gambled and let loose a streak of lightning from his ninjato. Marut and Andrew both would have wished they had communicated better, as Andrew made an erratic triple move straight into the incoming burst of electricity. A scream of torment escaped Andrew's lungs as he flew off his feet and crashed onto the ground.

"Kruna attacking Kruna!" said King Boo with a laugh. "This is making my day!"

"Can you just shut up already!" Ramona yelled at the royal ghost.

"Hey Einstein, I'm on your side!" Andrew snapped at Marut. The Boos were going crazy with laughter and cheers, taking glee in the Kruna of Shadow's lament and anguish. The shadow wielder painfully pressed himself back to his feet and got himself motivated to continue the fight. He was not going to be able to sustain much more damage, and he knew he wanted to be the one to confront King Boo, so he needed something smart and swift. At that point, the inspiration came to him. *That's it!* he then thought. *Bowser, Ramona; thanks for the idea!*

Boolossus eyed the Kruna of Shadow down, waiting for his next move. The ghost didn't have to wait for long, as Andrew took off and resumed his mad-dashing and shifting. Once more, Boolossus went on the pursuit.

"Charge all your energy into a lightning bolt!" Andrew shouted at Marut. "When I get close to you, fire it off at me!"

"What are you saying..." mumbled King Boo.

"You can't be serious!" Bowser called out.

"Don't question it – just do it!" Andrew demanded from the Kruna of Air.

Marut sighed and shook his head, but he prepped his tool for the attack anyways. He rippled the air around his ninjato as much as he could to create the necessary friction and shuttled his energy through to his blade. He continued adding friction and energy while Andrew was evading Boolossus. Andrew should've been slowing down but instead opted to speed up, confident that his idea was not going to fail. Cut after cut was made, and Boolossus copied every last one. The massive ghost did not try to jump or intercept any of the Kruna of Shadow's movements, so when Andrew made the final turn and headed straight for Marut, Boolossus stuck right behind without deviation in track. Marut took aim as Andrew and Boolossus dashed closer. With Andrew less than eight feet in front of him, Marut shot off the lightning.

What happened next baffled everyone watching, King Boo and Marut included. The lightning struck Andrew dead on, passing clean through and fatally impaling him... or so everyone thought. As soon as the lightning rampaged through the Kruna of Shadow, a second Andrew appeared right behind Marut, sharing the body position and momentum of the first Andrew. The second Andrew kept running a few more steps before he turned around to view resolution of his ploy. If it wasn't already obvious to anyone watching, the first Andrew was nothing more than a well-timed afterimage that fooled even Boolossus, who was unprepared for such a deception and therefore took the full fury of Marut's Great Lightning Strike. Boolossus jolted and rattled from the force of the lightning, but could not withstand its might. Under way too much pressure, the colossal ghost burst apart into its constituent fifteen Boos. The thirteen Boos scattered around the coliseum all grew silent and anxious.

Marut glanced around at all the Boos floating throughout the arena. He took a deep breath, puffed out his chest, widened his stance, and projected at the top of his lungs, "WHO WANTS SOME?!"

Startled, the twenty-eight Boos flinched and turned to fly away. They wasted no time shuffling through the air to head up and out into the great beyond, leaving their king by himself. The Kruna shifted all their attention towards the lone crowned ghost in the observation deck.

"Bunch of cowards," King Boo muttered. He flew down to ground level to face-off with Marut and Andrew. A grin tried to sneak its way onto the ghost's face. Even though both Grandmaster Pokey and Boolossus fell, the Kruna looked beaten down. "Kruna? A bunch of inexperienced rookies trying to pretend to be Kruna. What were the Cosmic Beings thinking when they appointed you lot as Kruna?"

Marut and Bowser were both depleted, and Ramona was near empty. Andrew himself was feeling shaky, but he had no intentions of backing off. Warra and Athelstan were the only two even remotely close to full power.

"You should've let Boolossus come after me so you wouldn't've burnt off so much energy and health," Marut said to his shadow counterpart.

"I don't recall explicitly asking for that Boolossus to chase after me!" Andrew replied. "Besides, that lightning strike of yours is what did the trick!"

"Andrew," Ramona began. "You should probably let Warra and Athelstan take-"

Andrew flared two crackling masses of darkness from his blades and fired them at King Boo. Before the blasts even struck home, he was running behind them. King Boo saw the attack and conjured a spiral shield of impure shadows to counteract and nullify the incoming bursts. Andrew was sure he was going to have an opening under the concealment of the clash of the shadows, but when he went through, the haze, King Boo was waiting for him. The ghost flipped himself up into the air to dodge and snatched Andrew by the back of his shirt, then slammed him down into the ground in a smooth, wide-arcing motion.

"Time to finish what I started!" King Boo snarled. Still holding onto

Andrew's shirt, he hoisted the dazed shadow wielder up. "You should have never escaped Elkon's Tower!" Opening his mouth wide open, he released a ball of impure shadows that pummeled Andrew and zapped him of a significant chunk of his remaining energy. The Kruna of Shadow went tumbling along the floor. King Boo teleported in front of the direction in which Andrew was headed and created a shadowy extension of his arm to smash onto the helpless fighter. The force from the blow fractured and tore into the arena floor.

"King Boo seems... a little bit more powerful," murmured Bowser. "More than in the past..."

King Boo picked up the limp Kruna one final time. "Looks like your team's gonna be down one person. Don't worry though. Nobody'll remember you anyways." The ghost pulled back and hurled Andrew high up into the air, simultaneously readying a highly-dense concentration of dark energy in his opposite arm. "Hakuna Matata! SO LONG!" Out came a rushing burst of darkness that looked ready to swallow and consume its target into oblivion.

"No!" Ramona screamed, thrusting her arm forward. "C'mon!" With her limited energy, all she could muster was a faint glow. Athelstan slammed his foot down to cascade the ground ahead in an attempt to strike King Boo and cutoff the attack, but the ghost shifted around and let loose a shadow blast from his free arm to counter the incoming shifting of stone and sand.

Semi-conscious, Andrew was not even aware of anything that was happening, nor did he even recognize he was airborne. A wave of certain doom was the last thing on his mind. Instead, he was scolding himself in his mind over his inadequacies and his failures. He kept arguing with himself that he could have done better, and to him, death would've been well-earned. He paid no attention to the rushing darkness coming at him from below. Likewise, no attention was paid to the rush of water that pushed him out of the way before King Boo's attack could meet and consume him. Even though the water knocked the last bit of consciousness from him, it saved him from the fatality of the shadow beam that soared into the sky and eroded as it continued out of sight.

"What?!" King Boo shrieked. The royal ghost and the Kruna all directed their attention to Warra. He had been cultivating the water in secrecy since Boolossus had entered the arena, gathering and creating moisture along and around his axes as he stood in the back behind the rest of the Kruna. Andrew plummeted out of the air and landed off in the coliseum stands.

"Thanks, Warra," said Ramona. "That was *way* too close!"

"That should've never gotten to that point!" Bowser groused. "Impulsive fool; he and Daisy both."

"Hey, we look after each other," Warra said with sweat beading on his head. Because of both the environment's unforgiving nature towards water wielders and the sheer amount of water Warra produced, he was out of power. With he, Marut, Bowser, and Ramona all drained of energy, and Andrew down for the count and out of it, the pressure fell primarily on Athelstan to stand against King Boo. The Kruna of Stone stepped forward, but was surprised to see Ramona and Marut moving up to flank him.

"Get back, you two," Athelstan directed. "Melee attacks are gonna have minimal effect on him!"

Ramona clutched her Light Broadsword tighter. "I don't care; I've been enough of a frightened mess for one day!"

King Boo stared at the Kruna of Light with a bored face. He flatly said, "Boo."

Ramona instantly flinched and staggered in place. "Stop it!" Her reactions drew an outburst of laughter from the ghost king, causing her to blush with furious intensity.

"Honestly, now I just feel bad!" King Boo remarked. "Am I being smug? I'm feeling pretty smug."

In a bold move, Ramona sheathed her sword and took off towards King Boo. She dove to grab the Shadow Blades that were knocked free from Andrew's hands. She stayed in a knelt position and crossed her blades, though King Boo could see right through her

guise and tell that she had no idea what to do.

"Poor little Kruna," King Boo muttered in distaste. He put his arms forward to bring forth a devastating culmination of shadows aimed at Ramona. "Now you don't have to live in fear."

As King Boo released his immense burst of darkness, Ramona knew she was going to be overwhelmed if she tried blocking. Unfortunately for her, she froze-up and did not make a move in any direction. She would have been flattened had Athelstan not been rushing towards her to make a timely dive in front of the blast. Putting as much physical might in as he could, he made a Shield Bash on the shadow burst that was sufficient enough to reflect the attack back at King Boo. Although Athelstan's Stone Shield was obliterated from the maneuver, King Boo, not expecting a reflection, was smothered by his own attack. The ghost had to use the majority of the remainder of his energy to brace against the shadows that came too quickly for him to react any other way. The searing chill was easier to deal with considering that as a Boo, he had no true physical body, but in the end, enduring the blast still required a veritable effort.

Ramona looked up, having closed her eyes and hid her face behind Andrew's blades, expecting the worst but relieved to know that she survived. "Thanks so much, Athelstan. I thought I was a goner!"

"Oh, don't mention it," the Kruna of Stone replied. "You just owe me a shield." He turned to address King Boo and started shaking his spear. "You like that? YOU LIKE THAT?!"

Shadowy wisps emanated all around King Boo, the remnants of his furious blast still flickering about on his form and through the air. He shook himself up a few times and replied with hasty frustration, "No, I don't like that! In fact, I hate that! I hate you! I hate all of you!" He used his arms to trace in opposite directions, creating a portal. "You're all gonna suffer, so the outcome of today has no bearing on me! Go ahead and get all happy and cutesy about your cheap shot! I've had enough of you low-class scum for one afternoon! But you'll see me again! Count on that!" He pulled himself into the portal and dispelled it once he was all the way through, leaving five worn out Kruna in the arena and their unconscious friend off in the stands.

"Cheap shot?" Athelstan grumbled. "He's only saying that because it worked against him! With his character, no wonder his spirit's not at rest yet!"

Marut ran for the stands. "I'm gonna go get Andrew."

"I don't know," Bowser muttered. "Maybe you should just leave him there. After what happened here, he'll likely go off and track down King Boo the moment he regains consciousness."

"No way," said Ramona. "I'll keep tabs on him and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

"Put a leash on him while you're at it," said the Kruna of Fire. "If he strays too far away next time, you can just yank on it to make him come tumbling back."

"Well, now I have to readjust back to life without a shield," Athelstan muttered. "Didn't even get to surf down a hill on it like I wanted to..."

Warra turned to Bowser. With a hint of impatience, the water wielder said, "Okay, we're all done here – *now* can we go look for Daisy?"

Chapter XIV

Meddlings of the Nefarious :

It had been almost two hours since Marissa returned to her mansion lair. She floated in the air in her throne room, stuffing her face with yoshi-shaped gummies from a huge bowl hovering by her side. "What the hell?!" she shouted with her mouth full. "Oh, so it's not a strike because he's the MVP?" Machula and Solovar had both recently entered the room, looking confused by their master's antics.

"What are you talking about, Lord Arkana?" Machula asked.

"I'm using my Malocchio to watch the Spitballs-Knights game, duh!" Marissa muffled, rolling her eyes. "Oh, what?! Oh my Shadow Queen, these umpires are starting to piss me off with their calls on pitches! THIS IS A RIVALRY GAME, NOT FANSERVICE!"

Solovar started rubbing his head. "Uhh, Lord Arkana-"

"Funky Kong's been throwing nothing but lasers all game!" Marissa screamed. "But every time Waluigi steps up to the plate, the umpires are all like, 'oh, we're just going to change the strike zone now and turn all these strikes into f-ing balls!' Damn, and now he's been walked again! This is part of the reason why his stats are inflated, you know!"

Machula grunted and shook his head. "Lord Arkana-"

"This is what the game's turned into now?" Marissa ranted on. "All the regular season games are being treated like all-star games? The Spitballs are on the road for Luma's sake! How do you get home field calls ON THE ROAD?! This is like watching the Patri-"

"Lord Arkana!" Solovar shouted.

"WHAT?!" the demon witch hollered. "I'm in, *the zone* here!"

"The one you requested," said Machula. "We bridged the portal to

bring her here."

Marissa's eyes flared even wider than they already were. "Well she's gonna have to wait! This is the eighth inning of the series' rubber match! Winner takes control of the division heading into the last fourteen games! Do you guys not understand what that means?!"

Tamara waltzed into the room, having heard the fuss from the hallway. "The Knights wouldn't be worthy of a wildcard spot without Petey Piranha. I hope you know nearly a third of their offensive production comes from him."

"Oh great, and now he's here too to give me lip!" the demon witch grumbled. "Why don't *all* of you Black Mage idiots just start showing up to interrupt my game?"

Maki popped his head up from behind Machula. "What's good, Marissa!"

"I WAS JUST KIDDING!" Marissa yelled.

As soon as Naraka came walking into the room to join the rest of the Sweeps, a portal opened up out of the floor through which King Boo flew in from. "Oh," King Boo mumbled. "Is this a bad time?"

"Okay," Marissa said with a sigh. "If all of you could just go back out to where we will be 'welcoming' our guest and wait until I am READY, that would be real great. Go on – shoo. Shoo." She refocused her attention onto her Malocchio Eye. "NO! That's a routine 6-4-3 and you threw it over Birdo's head?! Damnit, Pauline – they're not paying you all that money for you to make costly, boneheaded errors like that! They better rework her contract in the offseason!"

The purification of the heart chakra came easy for Daisy, requiring the easing and letting go of heartache. This was a technicality, however, since she had been – for lack of a better term – an independent loner since birth. The cleansing of this fourth chakra produced a bright green glow around her body leaving her two-for-

four with three chakras so far unexplored. Geno mentioned that her loner tendencies were conflicting with her true nature, and that even though the fourth chakra was cleansed, it would do her some good to reflect upon herself and do away with some of the isolative characteristics that she has clung to. Daisy refused, arguing that it was not needed regardless of Geno telling her that she was using self-isolation as a protective mechanism. But rather than stall with the stubborn Kruna of Earth, he decided to move on, for the reality was that Daisy had only purified two of her seven chakras.

The early evening was starting as Geno explained the fifth chakra to Daisy. "The throat chakra deals with effective communication; speaking the truth and stating what you believe in. The ability to speak out when something is amiss is a trait that is often overlooked, causing many who do not voice themselves to repress what they should be letting out. Over time, like the ills of the other chakras, this too can build up and boil over."

"Oh, well that's great!" Daisy assured. "I don't have *any* issues with that! My throat chakra should be fine and ready to go-"

"I'm not finished, Sarasa," Geno said. "I appreciate your overzealous outlook, but please, continue to take everything seriously."

"Oh, I'm very sorry," mumbled Daisy, regaining her quaint focus.

"Now then," Geno continued. "This chakra is all about expressing ourselves in a truthful manner... so lying blocks it quick and with marked resistance. You must be able to speak truths just as you must also be able to accept truth over deceit. That means that you must not accept something that you know is false. A blue glow is not emanating from your body, so I'm pretty sure that you're going to have to spend some time on this chakra's purification, aren't you?"

"What? No way!" asserted Daisy. "I've done nothing but give and accept the truth, no matter how gruesome or demoralizing some of those truths that I had to accept were!"

"Oh, then this should not take you long, should it, Kruna?" Geno said with a hint of condescension. "We're only going to get as far as you take us. I hope you're aware of that."

"This one will be quick, Geno!" Daisy declared. "I promise!"

Geno cracked a rare smile as he saw Daisy dive deep down into intense focus. *Such a peculiar elemental wielder to be a Kruna,* he thought. *Perhaps there is hope for you yet, young one* .

Neva wandered through Sarasa field, scouting out the area for trouble after unsuccessfully spending the afternoon trying to recruit new resistance members from the Castle Town populace. *I've got to figure out something quick,* she thought. *Now is a prime opportunity to take out King Sarasa; now, when he's not behind the protection of the Central Castle with all sorts of witnesses and guards lurking about. But that doesn't mean he's not going to have any sort of defense with him, which is why I need to have backup. There's no telling what's in that Great Canyon! I can't go running in there by myself, and Daisy's of no use to me in her current state...*

Without any hesitation, she dove into the nearby bushes. A single moderate source of energy and five other faint powers came into her senses and were heading her way. Not knowing whether they were hostile or not, she prepared her crossbow for a frantic free-for-all. *Individually, I could take each of them down for sure,* she asserted in her mind. *Hell, I bet I could take down all of them at once...*

After a few moments, the figures became clearly discernible as elemental wielders of water, stone, air, light, and shadow, and a fire wielder in the form of a larger koopa. She took note of the stone wielder carrying the unconscious shadow wielder on his shoulder. For a second, she wondered if that koopa was somehow Darmani, and if Marissa's magic had morphed him as he flew off into the air that night when the witch had stormed their base. Common sense told her though that even if Marissa caused the massive growth spurt and bulk, she would not have been able to completely change the elemental affinity of a being. *Still, are these five humans and one koopa friendly or hostile?* Neva wondered.

"You guys ever take a medication for a specific symptom when it has an essay's worth of side effects?" asked Marut.

"Oh, that's the worst!" Athelstan said. "Then you gotta take all these other meds to neutralize the side effects from the first med? Money grab! Nobody's got the coins to waste on that stuff!"

"Well, Wario sure does," muttered Bowser. "The moment he went off on his own, he got rich with that WarioWare franchise of his."

"WarioWare's scrub-tier," said Marut. "I like those games with the little pink dude that sucks stuff up!"

Ramona scratched her head, trying to think of what Marut was talking about. "Popopo?"

They don't seem like they're dangerous or malevolent, Neva thought. J *ust to be sure though...* She shifted in silence from underneath the cover of the underbrush to aim her crossbow at the incoming elemental wielders.

Unfortunately for Neva, she was not aware that Metal Mario had picked up on her earlier and had been tracking her down. Its footsteps had now become audible in the direction opposite that of the Kruna. The ice wielder turned around to see the metal figure moving into view. Once the Kruna got close to where Neva was hiding, they noticed the figure closing in as well.

"What's that up there?" Warra asked.

"No, it can't be," Athelstan said under his breath.

"Are you serious?" Marut blurted out. Metal Mario was coming closer, now visible and identifiable by all of the Kruna.

"Oh, REAL NICE," Bowser said, eyeing down Ramona and the unconscious Kruna of Shadow. "You two are the best! Seriously! *The* best!"

"I could have sworn I reduced that thing to a pile of crushed cans!" Neva remarked in shock as she jumped out from the bushes.

Athelstan handed Andrew to Ramona and shook out his hands as he stepped in front of his teammates. "I'm gonna do what I can against that thing!"

The Kruna of Stone did not get a chance to make a move on Metal Mario, as Neva had already channeled into the magnetism of ice and directed it onto the metal figure. As the wave of magnetized frost made contact with Metal Mario, the figure was initially bolted backwards, but after digging its hands into the ground, its momentum was stopped. This grounding also gave Metal Mario the base it needed to reverse polarity on the stream of magnetic frost and redirect its effects back onto Neva.

The Kruna were all surprised when they saw Neva fly dozens of yards backwards. The ice wielder was unable to do anything to maneuver out of her momentum or even break her fall due to the temporary paralysis the magnetism caused on her nervous system. The levels of magnetics she used on Metal Mario were far above what would have been used on an organic being. Metal Mario did not wait for any reactions from Neva's fall, already making its way towards the Kruna. Until Neva regained feeling, any retaliation had to come from Athelstan due to the current lack of power of the other Kruna.

Needing to come up with something quick, Athelstan looked down at the Boot Club Additions on his shoes and grinned. "I got an idea!"

Like a volatile mountain goat or a brutish bull, the Kruna of Stone put his hands on the ground and started kicking up his right leg over and over. As Metal Mario came closer, Athelstan gathered more energy into his massive, powerful lower body. This was something he would never have thought of doing before, but he had made up his mind; he was going to lay into that thick heap of metal.

With Metal Mario still slogging closer, Athelstan charged ahead. Being a stone wielder, his speed was nothing to be proud of, but it was still better than Metal Mario's lumbering run. Once he got close enough to the metal figure, Athelstan wound back his right leg with as much might as he could muster and slammed it forward. His foot, enhanced and protected by his fortified boot, bashed into Metal Mario's torso and sent the metal figure flying sky high. The Kruna all looked up to see the metal figure flailing around in midair as it soared off into the distance, not dropping until it was out of the range of normal human sight.

"Whew!" Athelstan hollered, celebrating in place. "My feet are BURNING! They are burning man! Woooo! Man; I gotta tip-toe! Gotta tipey-toe, tip-toe! Can you not see the smoke billowing from my heels?!"

"That was awesome, dude!" Marut yelled, running up to Athelstan for a high-five. "That was like extreme kickball!"

Warra jogged over to where Neva was to check if she was okay. After a few moments, she started moving around again. He helped Neva back up to her feet, after which she gave him an odd look and snapped, "Get off of me," as she shook him off.

Warra looked at her with surprise and responded, "I just making sure you were okay is all."

"You better make sure you're okay," snarled the ice wielder. "You look like you're close to keeling over, ocean-diver."

"You think Metal Mario's gonna find us again?" Warra asked as the Kruna all walked over to regroup with him.

"You know what," Bowser grumbled. "At this point, I don't even know."

"Alright, I guess Daisy wasn't kidding about that thing," Neva muttered.

Warra looked at the strange little girl with surprise. "You know Daisy?"

"Pfft, yeah, I know the Sarasa girl," Neva replied with a guttural tone. "I'm guessing you do if we're referring to the same Daisy."

"Where'd she go?" Warra questioned. "Can you take us to her?"

"I can," answered the ice wielder. "But is it worth my time? Aside from the huge koopa there and maybe the brown version of the Hulk, You guys all look pretty pathetic. Would be a shame if I lead you there and you all get picked-off during some ambush..."

"Would be a shame if you never hit triple digits on the scale, tiny,"

Bowser muttered to himself.

"I heard that, fire-spitter," snapped Neva. "Not everyone has to be as big as you."

"Man, for a little ice wielder, you've got a mouth to ya!" said Athelstan.

"Kiss my ass, ya jolly giant of a mountain-lurker," Neva remarked. "Since I'm heading back there anyways, I'll take you guys to Daisy as long as you don't become liabilities. In fact, just to be sure you don't..." She pulled out a pouch from her pocket that contained eight Ultra Mushrooms. "I picked up a batch of these while I was in Castle Town. They won't restore you to full power, but at least you won't be walking around weary and defenseless." She passed around the bag so that each of the Kruna got one. Ramona took an extra and kept it in her pocket for Andrew when he awoke. The pouch was passed back to Neva with two Ultra Mushrooms left.

"We greatly appreciate these offerings," Warra said before eating his restorative mushroom.

"Don't mention it, water-sucker," Neva responded, already marching down the path. "Now follow me and stay close, and I'll get you caught up on what's been going on here..."

"Uh-oh," Tamara whispered to Solovar. "Looks like the Knights lost..."

Marissa floated into the graveyard to join King Boo and the five Sweeps who were all monitoring the portal as they waited for her. A scowl was plastered on her face, her arms folded behind her back on her way over to the active portal on the ground. Dropping through the portal lead into an entire world beyond that which anyone of their current realm could ever conceive, and it was on the other side of that portal that a certain being of interest existed. Machula and Maki had a Mystic Harpoon armed and ready to fire into the portal on Marissa's command, and Naraka stood nearby with a large glass vase.

"This harpoon will lock onto her energy signature and track her down until it hits her," Machula informed Lord Arkana.

"Then, when she sees where the harpoon was originally fired from, she will trace it back through the portal to here!" added Maki. "We're just waiting on your order to initiate, Lord Arkana! So what do you think?"

"Wow," Marissa remarked with surprise.

"Impressed?" asked Machula.

"This isn't your average, everyday stupid," said Marissa, pressing her fingers against her forehead.

Maki crossed his arms. "Well maybe it is stupid, but it's also-"

"Don't say it!" snapped Marissa. "Look, we're trying to invite someone here! We're not trying to go fishing! How is someone supposed to react when a harpoon jams into their flesh?"

"I agree with Machula and Maki," said Tamara. "They're the scientists here. Besides, what difference does the method make? You're intending to steal power from her, and irrespective of even that, it's not much different from what you did to draw King Boo's attention-"

Marissa walked over to Tamara and pressed her face against the green-clothed Black Mage's own. "Tamara... for once, I wish you would just shut your big YAPPER!"

"Hey Marissa! We just fired the harpoon!" Maki called out with cheer.

"What?!" Marissa griped. When she looked, the harpoon rope was already tracking down into the portal. "Why? How? I thought you were waiting for me to say when to fire!"

"We were!" Machula replied. "I just pushed the wrong button..."

"Didn't you make the harpoon?" Marissa asked. "Bruh! How did you push the wrong button?"

"It was resting on my shoulder and it rolled over!" was Machula's answer.

"I told you we should've used a trigger, not a button!" shouted Maki.

"Man, you guys certainly are a quirky bunch, aren't you?" said King Boo.

Within seconds, a titanic, godlike being burst from the portal. Deyanira the Dream Destroyer hurled into the air above the graveyard in all her glory. To Marissa, King Boo, or any of the Sweeps, Deyanira was just a very powerful being, but unknown to them, Deyanira was the result of the fusion of Antasma and Cackletta. Elkon's death did not appear to disrupt the gravitational singularity that kept the two fused together.

"Who disturbed me with this crude weapon?" Deyanira boomed, holding the end of the Mystic Harpoon.

"Look, I'll keep this short," said Marissa. "I'm looking for a high power source to use for a special spell I'd like to perform, and-"

"You expect me... to comply to you and your demands?" Deyanira asked with a chuckle.

Marissa flared her Malocchio Eye. "We can either do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. I'm not asking for *all* of your energy, you know."

"But why should I give any... is what I want to know," Deyanira cooed with a laugh. She raised her arms high to prepare for her signature Mental Blast, a technique that crippled the Kruna in their past encounter with her. Marissa on the other hand suspected something very sly and dangerous about this being ahead of time, so when Deyanira directed her Mental Blast at the demon witch, nothing happened. The Malocchio Eye gave off a brief flash, but no harm was done to Marissa.

"Nice try, fool," Marissa snarled with an unholy grin. "My Eye protects me from mental assaults and attacks like whatever pathetic technique it was you just tried. But I'll give you credit for

deviousness."

"Interesting..." said Deyanira. "You... have my attention now..."

Marissa snapped her fingers, at which point Naraka stepped towards the Dream Destroyer and put the glass vase on the ground. "Naraka here has just placed a Power Vase for you to donate a mere portion of your energy."

"How much?" Deyanira questioned with a raised eyebrow.

Marissa started playing with her hair. "Oh, I don't know. Let's say, half?"

"HALF?!" Deyanira screamed in anger. "I don't think so! I don't care what you have to offer me!"

"I'm asking for energy, not life force!" Marissa snapped. "Energy'll replenish! It's not like you're using it anyways! You know, Sarasaland has a ton of money concentrated in its Central Castle that I bet-"

Deyanira crossed her arms and whipped her head to the side as she descended back down into the portal. She discarded the end of the Mystic Harpoon she was holding and disbanded the portal once she passed all the way through.

"Real smooth, Lord Arkana," Tamara said. "Lure the divine titan with earthbound, materialistic possessions; of course that would work."

Marissa went up to Tamara and shoved her face against the green-clothed Sweep's own again. "Tamara... why don't you do everyone a sincere service and CLAM UP!"

"Can I please say what I *need* to say now?!" King Boo asked with impatience. "I had a run in with a team of Kruna at Birabuto!"

"Kruna, you say?" Marissa sneered, raising her chin. She channeled into the Remote Viewing of her Malocchio Eye to scan around Sarasa Field.

"Try looking around the area south of Castle Town," suggested King

Boo.

After a few moments, Marissa spotted a group of seven elemental wielders heading in the direction of the Muda Kingdom. "So this is the current generation of Kruna?" she taunted. "They're making it too easy for me! I see that the little ice wielder that was with King Sarasa's daughter is with them too! Oh, I wonder if the Sarasa girl is a part of that group as well."

"If you mean Daisy, yes," King Boo replied. "I've crossed paths with them before, and I believe she was heading them."

"How grand!" hollered the demon witch. "This is gonna be a bloodbath!"

"Hey! You have to be careful with those Kruna!" King Boo warned. "They're annoying and erratic!"

"But you seem to forget; You are you, and I am me," Marissa said. "That little ice wielder is likely going to try and bring at least a portion of that group of Kruna to the Great Canyon to confront King Sarasa and destroy his T-29 Remodeling Devices, so expect at least one of those Kruna to be dead in that conflict. They don't appear to be much of a threat to anyone. I'm serious. Past teams of Kruna could have trounced this group. But if it makes you feel any better, then stay close to the lair here."

"Hey, I'm not trying to hide from them!" King Boo snapped. "I'm just alerting you so you don't get caught off guard!"

"Well it turns out that this may be just what I needed," Marissa cooed with malice. "Deyanira did not want to give me any of her power, but perhaps I can extract some from one of those Kruna..."

"What kind of spell are you trying to gather energy for?" asked King Boo.

Marissa made a coarse smirk. "A spell unlike any other that when combined with the coming Blood Moon will change the world as we know it..."

Chapter XV

Mountain Haze :

A blue glow surrounded Daisy's body for a few moments before fading into the ether. Geno nodded in approval upon witnessing proof of the throat chakra's purification. Just as she said, Daisy did not take long to cleanse her fifth chakra.

"Now, let's move on to the sixth chakra," said Geno. "We are making extraordinary time, Kruna, but we still have only completed our work with three of the seven chakras, so don't let up! In less than three weeks, the Blood Moon will be upon the lands here, and you must be ready and reverted back to your normal self with your 'to-be' newfound abilities."

"Can we at least break for the day?" Daisy asked. "I've been holding back this jittery jumpiness for as long as I could! I need to break from this meditative state already!"

Geno looked around and noticed the sanctuary taking on a golden hue underneath the fading veil of haze overhead, meaning the moon would begin to rise soon. "Alright," he replied. "We will pick up with the forehead chakra tomorrow. I'm allowing this break because you're going through these chakras with great speed. For some, it can take a whole day to purify just one." He paused, glancing around the fields once more. "Neva's been gone for a while, hasn't she?"

"I'm sure she's on her way," said Daisy. "The daylight at this time of year is short, so not too much time has passed. I think she's crafty and cunning enough to be able to evade any trouble from Marissa or her Sweeps if they actually did hunt her down."

"If she does not come back by nightfall, then let me know," Geno said. "I will remain in this general area for a little while. You're dismissed to do as you wish."

Daisy jumped to her feet, feeling a kind of revitalization that ran

deeper than any she could ever remember. "I'm gonna go work on my elemental techniques. I'm really starting to feel more comfortable in this body now!"

Geno watched as Daisy ran off into the deeper parts of the sanctuary, impressed by the Kruna of Earth's level of energy and enthusiasm despite all that had gone wrong with her. *You're certainly an unconventional earth wielder* , he thought. *But that's not a bad thing at all. You've got a long way to go, but I wonder how much of an impact you'll have on this world when all is said and done.*

"Daisy!" a familiar voice called out.

"Warra?!" Daisy responded, whipping around to see. From the direction of the tunnel that led out of Geno's Sanctuary came Neva and all of the Kruna. Andrew was awake and trotting along under his own power. They all gathered around Daisy, though Neva kept to the side and a little further away with her arms crossed. Daisy's teammates were surprised to see her new form, but they didn't address it right away.

"It's great to see you again, Daisy," said Ramona.

"You guys are all here!" Daisy exclaimed. "But how?!"

"Rosalina hinted to us that you might need some help," Andrew casually replied.

"That you might," Bowser repeated. "Also, you left your map in my palace."

"We got a little sidetracked," added Marut. "But we ran into Neva and she led us here."

"Wow, I see you all got new equipment," said Daisy. "Toad did pretty good!"

"I see you got a new body!" Athelstan remarked. "So that demon witch did that to you, huh?"

The Kruna of Earth nodded. "I take it Neva told you about what's

been going on here in Sarasaland."

"You should've let us come along," said Warra. "With all of us working together-"

"Please, spare me the scolding speech," Daisy replied with a laugh.

"I haven't gotten a chance to scold you since you left, so I've been saving it up," Warra responded. "I missed a prime opportunity because of that."

"Yeah, sorry I got myself mutated into this grotesque form," Daisy muttered.

"No, it's not grotesque!" Warra assured. "It's unique! Don't be sorry! Mistakes happen, accidents happen. What matters is that you're alive; the rest will sort itself out."

Neva looked back and forth at Daisy and Warrra, and, with impatience, blurted out, "Hey! What is this; Beauty and the Beast role-reversal? Catch up and socialize on your own time! We have urgent issues to take care of, remember?" She snapped her fingers at the Kruna of Earth. "Sarasa, your dad's out at the Great Canyon working on his T-29 Remodeling Devices as we speak; We're gonna head down there tomorrow morning and hopefully take him out on the spot, and while we're at it destroy all of those T-29s. You in?"

"Yeah!" Daisy shouted. "I'm game! Let's make some noise!"

"Might I ask, Daisy, if these are your Kruna teammates?" Geno asked as he walked over to the group.

Daisy nodded. "They most certainly are!"

"Then they can handle the mission in the Great Canyon without you," said Geno.

"Wait, what?! WHY?!" Daisy shouted.

"Oh good lord," Neva grumbled. "Don't tell me you guys are all up on that spiritual crap still!"

"We've got your chakras to work on, Daisy," replied Geno. "This can not be stalled any longer than it is already being stalled. Your friends are more than capable of handling the mission without you, are they not?"

"Well, yeah, I guess..." Daisy muttered. "But I gotta get out there-"

"What you have to do is finish purifying your chakras," asserted Geno. "This is important, Sarasa. Your training will not be able to progress any further until you have cleansed all of your chakras, and you need the rest of this training if you hope to have any chance of standing against Lord Arkana!"

Neva stepped forward and jabbed her crossbow into the air. "If we had an army here of *real* warriors like *me,* we wouldn't be in this situation, and Lord Arkana would have already been defeated and locked away!"

"We would have defeated her already if I didn't get stuck in this damned body!" screamed Daisy. Geno shook his head and was about to tell Daisy how wrong her statement was, but she spoke up again before he got a chance to. "I'll show you what kind of a warrior I am down at that canyon!"

"It's alright, Daisy," said Bowser. "Relax. We can handle it. There'll be seven of us down there."

"Oh c'mon!" Daisy growled, practically roaring. Her impatience did not draw as much surprise from everyone as her reaction did. It was not an uncommon one for her, but the Betedaimon venom within seemed to amp it up well beyond what would have been considered human.

"Let them handle it, Daisy," Geno demanded, solemn and unwavering. "That is not a request."

"Don't you tell me what to do!" Daisy grunted. "I'm *this* close to ditching this boring chakra work!"

"Control yourself," Geno sharply snapped. "That's that beast working its way to the surface-"

Before anyone could react, Neva zipped in front of Daisy and rested the bayonet of her crossbow on the center of the earth wielder's neck. "Do what the puppet says or get choked by ice."

Daisy smirked. "Go ahead. The cold never bothered me anyway."

"Ooh, you're just irking me on, aren't you?" said Neva. "Sass it up, Sarasa. I bet you'd be bothered if you were stuck under a palace of ice."

Warra, having already seen more than enough, ran up and yanked Neva away from Daisy. "What's your deal?" he asked. "You don't do that to an ally! What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with you?" Neva replied with a snicker, now pointing her Frost Bayonet at Warra. "Impulsive just like her; if you pulled at me the wrong way, it would've been her throat! Now would that have been on my hands or yours, pretty boy?" Daisy grunted and growled in place at Neva like a ravenous panther. The whole scene drew anxiety from the rest of the Kruna, Ramona and Andrew in particular.

"Friends!" bellowed Athelstan, stepping toward the disturbance with a huge smile. "Don't fight! We are all in this together!"

"Oh, coming from the cheerful BFG, we should heed that!" snapped Neva, rolling her eyes. Turning to Daisy, she shouted, "Look here, Sarasa; I know I asked for you to come earlier, but now that I think about it, you're better off staying away from this mission. If your dad catches a glimpse of you in your current state, that's going to make things exponentially worse not just for you but for all of us! Don't forget that!" She then turned back to Warra. "And you, Mr. Polite! That kinda attitude is not gonna work on this side of the world!"

"Enough! The whole lot of you!" Geno shouted. Almost never did he raise his voice. "You seven are going to the Great Canyon tomorrow morning, and Daisy stays here – not another word more on the matter! Those elemental weapons of King Sarasa's, the T-29's, must be taken care of, and Daisy must be prepared for what's to come. There is no place for bickering when there are enemies mounting on multiple sides!"

"You can put it away, Neva," said Andrew, his expression intense. Bowser looked on in a stoic manner with his arms crossed, silent and keeping out of the conflict.

Neva's smirk faded to a blank face as she brought down her crossbow, sighing. Her use of her tool started making Marut wonder about those of the rest of his friends and his own as well. The air wielder got a little fidgety as he started thinking about the purpose of an elemental tool, of something so beneficial that he just witnessed with his own eyes had the ability to turn lethal in a matter of seconds. *How different are these tools to King Sarasa's T-29s?* Marut wondered. *Aren't we being a bit hypocritical?*

"This is looking nothing like a team, especially not one of Kruna!" Geno scolded to Warra, Daisy, and Neva. "Extraneous circumstances aside, I expect more from you all! The times we are in are growing evermore ominous, and evermore dangerous forces are at work underneath our perception! You Kruna must come together as one unified force! Your unity will prove to be the defining factor in the turn out of the battles to come! You are all necessary for the success of our campaign against King Sarasa and Marissa! *All* of you! Every last one of you!"

Andrew and Marut both perked up when they heard the last part of Geno's words. Neva on the other hand was clenching her jaw in frustration. *Why the hell is he lumping me in with them?* Neva scowled in thought. *Termites must've gotten to his headcase.*

"So the king's weapons," Marut mumbled, trying to change the subject. "The weapons that created that canyon we're going to... they're really that bad?"

"They're terrible," replied Neva. "And they've got to all be destroyed. And that's what we're gonna do."

Marut took out his Cyclone Ninjato and started examining it. "Then... the stuff we use; isn't it bad too?"

"What? No!" Ramona replied, frantically waving her hands. "We're using elemental *tools* , you know! We're taking out King Sarasa's elemental *weapons* . Our elemental tools are designed primarily for

the purpose of focusing our elemental powers better with less difficulty and less energy wasting; the elemental tool's purpose is pure! Their intent follows *our* intent!"

"Elemental weapons are designed for the sole purpose of destruction and harm," added Neva. "I've seen it first hand. King Sarasa has done nothing but contort landscapes and conquer nations with his elemental weapons. The weapons can work by themselves, without input from any kind of elemental wielder. They tend to be machines rather than implements. Like I said, horrible things that we've got to obliterate."

Warra stared down Neva as he addressed her. "And like Geno said, our success will come from working as a team! That means maintaining positive relationships and cooperation, not bickering and vitriol."

"Yeah yeah yeah, quit your wining," muttered Neva. "I'm just trying to get this beast to stay in line."

"But that's not how we act towards comrades when we need them to do something!" asserted Warra. "And she's not a beast! Forget what her current form is now, because that's not going to be permanent!" He turned to Daisy, looking her dead in the eyes. "When you're ready, then you're ready, but until then, do everything you can to get ready. Do whatever Geno says you need to do to get yourself prepared and on your way back to normal. We can handle the field work for now. Please, just stay here and do this one thing for yourself. Just this once. Okay?"

Daisy stared back, able to sense the sincerity in the Kruna of Water's voice and replied, "Okay."

"Alright then," Neva said, much more tame than before. She waltzed off into the deeper regions of the sanctuary, away from the group. "I'll be taking you Kruna to the Great Canyon tomorrow morning, and Daisy stays here."

It made sense. Daisy's bestial appearance would give King Sarasa a substantial amount of leverage over her and would all but guarantee her status as an enemy of Sarasaland. Knowing the king, he would

probably try to pin all the disappearances of the citizens on her. There was still no telling what her mother would do, much less where she had vanished to. *Oh yeah, that's another mystery altogether to have to worry about,* Daisy thought.

"How about we all camp out tonight?" Andrew suggested, the sky overhead continuing to dim. "We can stretch out underneath the shining of the stars upon this beautiful landscape."

"I have extra blankets, bedding, and the like put out in my house over there," said Geno, pointing across the river. "I anticipated your arrival."

"All of us?" Bowser asked. "How's that?"

"When one Kruna appears, the others are not far behind," replied Geno. "Simply put, Kruna are like a pack of wolves. They're meant to travel in teams, not alone. Only when a wolf is sick and injured does he leave the pack."

The flames kicked up embers into the moonlit sky as Athelstan, Marut, Bowser, Warra, Daisy, Neva, Andrew, and Ramona all sat around the bonfire in a circular pattern. The fire had ignited over the collection of sticks and twigs by a torch courtesy of Bowser, and kept contained in a stone pit by way of Athelstan. With blankets and bedding set up next to each of the elemental wielders, they were all getting ready to sleep for the crisp night. Geno was nowhere to be found. Everyone assumed he was somewhere in his house, but no one remembered seeing him go in there. But then again, a cosmic being was not bound to sleep like a person of flesh and blood.

"So what's this Marissa person like?" Bowser asked Daisy. He had thought of asking her about her dad, but figured that after what transpired just a couple hours earlier, it would be best to not bring him up again.

"Three-eyed demon witch," Daisy said. "Well, *sometimes* three-eyed. Looks kinda like a bigger, fuller, paler, black-haired version of Peach, maybe? But there's no telling how old she is. She's pretty

loony in the head and a sadistic sociopath by heart... if she actually has a heart at all..."

"And like I told you guys on our way here, she's an immortal spellcaster who's been liberal with exterminating lives," added Neva. "Avoid her at all costs until we can come up with a way to defeat her."

"Defeating an immortal, that's a tall order, you know," Andrew muttered. He was still unconscious when Neva was filling in the rest of the Kruna, so he missed all that the ice wielder relayed on them.

"But it can be done," said Daisy. "Just wait until I get back to my normal self. I'll see to it that she's taken down!"

"You just focus on Geno's directions," Warra remarked. He stretched out and yawned before lying down. "We'll take care of the rest."

"Oh c'mon, Warra!" Marut shouted. "We got the whole night! Let's stay up and do something!"

"Negatory," Bowser said, sprawling out as well. "We got work to do tomorrow."

Ramona scooted over and whispered something in Andrew's ear, eliciting a quick giggle from the shadow wielder. With a wave of her hand, prism of translucent light appeared overhead, drawing everyone's attention. Andrew then set out his hands as if they were controlling puppets, casting figures of darkness into the light projection.

"Check it out!" Athelstan hollered. "Shadow puppets!"

"It's a Goomba!" Marut called out as Andrew kept contorting the shadows. "No, it's a Goomba with wings! And now, it's flying! But then some guy came outta nowhere and jumped on top of it! Now the guy's going up and the Goomba fell down! And, and now there's some dude in a cloud chasing the guy! Oh, he just threw a shell at the guy!"

Ramona and Andrew went on casting shadow puppet shows for a little while until everyone got tired. After wishing each other a good

night's sleep, Bowser and Warra both nodded off. Then Athelstan got tired and went down for the night. Marut then calmed down enough to lay out, soon drifting off to slumber. Then Ramona followed, leaving only Neva, Andrew, and Daisy still awake. They let the bonfire trickle down to a meager fraction of its original size.

Neva glanced at Athelstan and stared at him for a handful of moments. She could not figure out what it was, but there was something about the atmosphere at that very moment that made her feel like she could loosen up and relax a little. It could have had something to do with what Geno said earlier. There was no doubt that good chemistry would only improve their odds against King Sarasa and Marissa, but these people that Neva were around were so... friendly... almost too friendly; way more friendly than what she had grown accustomed to. And if that was the case, then why the bitterness from her? With a sigh, she said to the two Kruna that were still awake, "Look, guys... I'm sorry for my attitude."

"Is that so?" Daisy replied with an eyebrow raised. "That's a change in demeanor I wasn't expecting."

"I'm serious," Neva said under her breath. "I probably have been a little callous to you guys..." When Daisy's expression remained unchanged, the ice wielder added, "Okay, I definitely have been a little callous to you guys." Daisy still gave her an odd look, to which Neva then added. "Okay! I've been very rude and cold! Are you happy now, cave-dweller?"

Daisy just smirked and crossed her arms. "Alright, I guess I can take you seriously."

"How have you not been taking her seriously?" Andrew asked the Kruna of Earth. "She's got an immense amount of power, like she's been building and compressing it for as long as she was aware of it, making it incredibly dense! I was able to sense it the moment I regained consciousness!"

Neva sighed again. "It doesn't really mean that much."

"What are you talking about?" replied Andrew. "Our whole team received a boost in power not too long ago, and you still have more

power than any one of us!"

"Yeah, I might seem like I have the most power out of anyone here," Neva responded with a shrug. "But, I can't say that it really matters."

"Oh, cause ice wielders are naturally inclined to carry high energy reserves," Daisy said with a nod.

"Well, yeah," Neva mumbled. "But that's not what I was taking into account." She reached for her Frost Crossbow she had set on the ground earlier and began caressing and staring at it. "Sure I got a ton of power... but I'm only able to channel it through an elemental tool, like my crossbow. I know most elemental wielders can work with or without the tool, but for me, the tool's a necessity. If I didn't have the tool, I would struggle trying to make an icicle. I was always picked on as a kid because of that... and still am to this day when people find out..."

"That's terrible," murmured Daisy. "I'm sorry to hear that happened to you."

Neva shifted her mouth to one side and flicked her free hand as if she were judging Daisy's words to be redundant. "I was bullied all the time as a kid. And as the years went on, and elemental wielders were needed to resist against King Sarasa's invasion, I was frequently and relentlessly snubbed. I wanted to fight, I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to be useful! But they never let me, they thought I was too weak. They thought I was unimportant and useless and that I was going to just get in the way..."

"I can totally understand how that feels," Daisy said, thinking back to all the times she was snubbed and ignored in her time at the Mushroom Kingdom. "Really. I really do."

"I second that," stated Andrew. "We're all here for something. It always hurts to be told that you're without purpose."

"And that is when I began to truly despair," Neva muttered, tossing aside her crossbow. "I could deal with the bullying, and the mean-spirited people I could tolerate from time to time, but not being valued, or recognized, or respected, that ate away at me. It certainly

didn't help that King Sarasa succeeded in taking over my homeland. For the longest time, I couldn't do a thing. Despite all my best efforts, I was not needed by anyone. I was..."

"Expendable..." murmured Andrew. "Aimless..."

Neva nodded. "Unnecessary."

"Faceless?" Daisy asked.

"... Yeah... all of that," Neva mumbled. "And so I thought, 'Well, if I'm so unimportant to everyone, then why should anyone be important to me?' You know? I guess bitterness just naturally followed. Why should I care about someone else when they don't care about me?" She started hunching over and curling up into a ball. "Why should I care about myself if nobody cares about me..."

Andrew got up and walked over to Neva. "I hate being a sentimentalist like this," he said. "But I hate seeing people upset even more." With no hesitation in his movements, he sat down right next to the ice wielder and put his arm around her, pulling her in close and tight. Neva's gut reflex was to strip free and slam a foot into his chest, but she didn't. In fact, the tension in her body was not mounting but instead releasing. She felt her pulse slow down, noticing she was feeling at ease. Daisy noticed Neva relaxing and couldn't help but smile.

"I care," Andrew then said. His tone sounded phenomenally nurturing. "Daisy cares. Geno cares. The rest of the Kruna care. You're here with us, and you helped us reunite with our friend. We're all thankful for that."

Neva then felt something she wasn't sure she ever felt before. As far back as she could remember, she did not recall anyone ever showing her any sort of indication of affection or care, physical, verbal, or emotional; not even from her own parents. Here she was, being held by somebody, yet she always associated physical contact with attacks. This was new to her, and she didn't now how to respond whatsoever. But Neva didn't feel like responding anyways, so she just leaned into the Kruna of Shadow and rested her head on top of his chest. With a blank, depressed face, she stared into the

remains of the bonfire.

There was something about the interaction between the ice and shadow wielders that Daisy felt she had to take note of. If there was something to learn or if there was some sort of takeaway that was developing, it was eluding the Kruna of Earth. Or maybe it was only escaping her because her own apprehension on the subject was still preventing her from acknowledging what she was observing. *Maybe I'm just getting tired or something* , she thought.

"I used to be a bully," Andrew told the ice wielder. "I used to feed off of my own anger for power and take it out on those around me because it made me feel significant and it felt damn good being the dominant kid. I remember this one classmate in particular I laid out a pretty forceful hit on though, and I remember the agony on his face as he bent down to his knees and screamed. It was bad. He looked about ready to throw up. The sight was sickening to me, and I sickened myself knowing that I was able to cause something like that. At that point, I never wanted to see anyone else in so much pain ever again. So from then on, I swore I would reserve the use of force for the ones out there in the world that deserve it. Neva, I speak for all the bullies everywhere in saying this; I'm sorry that you suffered so much. I'm sorry for all you went through."

No words were spoken by anyone for a few moments, but then Andrew noticed moisture on his shirt and looked down at Neva. Tears were streaming from her wide-open eyes, followed several moments later by sniffles that eventually lead into a quiet breakdown. After all Neva had displayed before, the last thing Daisy was expecting was for the ice wielder to weep for any reason. Now Neva was showing pain, pent up and repressed for however long, and in her, Daisy and Andrew both felt the raw emotion being released.

"I'm not crying!" Neva barely managed to say. "I hate you both! You all better shut up before you say something stupid!" Contrary to what she said, she then started crying even harder than she was before.

Daisy and Andrew both shared another look, both equally surprised but understanding of Neva. Neither of them wanted to see the ice wielder so distressed and unnerved. They both made up their minds

and decided they were not going to sleep until Neva settled down and was feeling better.

Neva started shuddering, as if her body temperature had abandoned her. "I feel cold, you guys," she mumbled. "I feel really cold."

Chapter XVI

The Great Canyon :

With Neva and the Kruna off to the Great Canyon, Daisy sat alone underneath the mid-morning mist of Geno's Sanctuary and awaited instruction on her next chakra purification. She made sure she was in a meditative state so that she could finish the cleansing as soon as possible and get back into action. Not being out on the field was nagging her since they had left.

Geno came into view from off in the distance and took a seat in front of the Kruna of Earth in the same manner he had done the previous day. The attentiveness and focus of the earth wielder before him caught his attention, though he didn't acknowledge it. They had her sixth and seventh chakra to cleanse, and then they had to circle back around and take care of her first and third chakra. That could all collectively take two hours to do... or it could take two weeks. It all depended on how well Daisy would progress through them.

"Let us get on to your sixth chakra," said Geno. "This is the forehead, or brow, chakra, and its origin should be self-explanatory. This chakra has-"

A purple-indigo light suddenly overtook Daisy's form and danced about her body. Geno stared at Daisy with startled surprise and awe at the sign of the sixth chakra's purification. The glow that shone from Daisy seemed to be the strongest and most lively of the bunch yet, and also took the longest to dissipate. The earth wielder herself didn't even bother looking up.

"That's unreal," murmured Geno. "I didn't even finish explaining and yet you've managed to purify your brow chakra!"

"I have?" Daisy asked in wonder. It then became evident that Daisy didn't even notice her sixth chakra's cleansing. "I don't understand; I mean, what was I supposed to do? What's the sixth chakra for?"

"Well," Geno began, adjusting his hat. "As I was starting to say

before, this chakra has to do with using your intuition to its fullest and being able to see the big picture. This chakra enhances your ability to put things into perspective and learn from your experiences, both positive and negative. Cleansing this chakra requires open mindedness, understanding, the ability to both acknowledge and accept the reality we can sense, the realities that which we can not sense, and the realities that we have yet to even discover, let alone comprehend." He paused for a moment, staring at the mutated Kruna. Had the brow chakra been open and free-flowing the entire time? How could it have been cleansed so quickly? Or did it even need any purification at all?

Daisy shrugged. "Alright. I'm not gonna think about it too much. So since six is taken care of already, let's go ahead and move on to number seven then!"

"Yes, we shall do so," Geno agreed. He then chuckled a little as he said, "You know, Sarasa, you may be able to see with your own eyes what Marissa cannot see with all three of hers."

Happy to move on, Daisy nodded and awaited Geno's next set of directions.

King Sarasa was not happy.

The sun was rising overhead, shining down into the hidden Sarasaland Science Center-Armory packed deep within the Great Canyon. It looked like it was going to be a productive day at work for him and his associates, improving upon the seismic capacities of the T-29 Remodeling Devices and honing blueprints for possible future innovations and designs of new weapons. The huge, mobile machines with four thick drills and various concussion instruments were the only reason why the king was able to even create the Great Canyon in the first place. A combination of rippling machinery, high-tech laser beams, and earthquake-inducing programs made for a devastating elemental weapon that his scientists and engineers were working to improve upon for even more effective results. The location for such work was perfect. *Nobody would be able to find this base,* the king thought. *This Great Canyon is off limits to civilians.*

And even so, who would want to drop this far down into a canyon? Only I know the geography of this area, so only I and my workers know the most efficient way to descend down into here.

And still, even with all that was going right, King Sarasa was bitter and frustrated. Maintaining his stranglehold on Sarasaland and expanding his influence across the map had been a simple endeavor with little difficulty for so long, but now, he was starting to feel a bit more pressure. The recent appearance of his daughter disturbed him, made all the more disconcerting by the fact that she had apparently known about his dealings when she confronted him at Sarasaland State University. *But what does that mean?* he mused. *Before she left, she didn't know a thing about my military or my usage of Sarasaland's finances... or maybe that's what she wanted me to believe?*

No, no, no, King Sarasa rebutted in thought. *She was much too ignorant and naive as a child. Someone had to have squealed on me, but who? Could it have been someone here?* He looked around to survey the gorge to try and pinpoint a traitor in the midst. *If he or she is here at this very moment, they must be executed at once.* He saw Vastus directing construction on a more recent T-29, unwavering in his focus and energy. *It could not have been Vastus. He's been one of the best police commissioners I've had throughout the years, and is working hard for a promotion.*

It must have been someone outside Sarasaland, the king thought. *But not just someone who's never set foot here; someone who was originally here, but left. Then again, does it really matter to me? The citizens are loyal to the Central Castle. They answer to me, so one little traitor mouthing off will not cause anything more than a public disturbance. Daisy was always a loud, rebellious little delinquent as a child, so of course she'll be ready to oppose me. Maybe I should be concerned with that little ice wielder she was with too, but aside from those two, do I really have any measurable threat to my goal?*

Years and years ago, the king was just a child from an average family that resided in what was now present-day Sarasaland. He was an adventurous little boy who went on journeys and trips every day that he did not have to go to school. Whether or not he had someone else there with him did not matter. He wanted to get out

and explore the vast world regardless of if his friends felt like tagging along that day and independent of whatever plans his own parents had. It was on one solo-quest in particular that he stumbled upon an ancient artifact of immeasurable power while stalking through the lands far off to the northwest. He knew that venturing so far away from home would get him in trouble with his mother and father, but he felt compelled to get out on the trail. Looking at the artifact incited fear and mystique within him. A little frightened, he had decided to continue on his way and leave the shiny piece of metal there, but then something happened. He wasn't sure how or why, but he got a grand idea that overtook his mind and filled him with even more drive and ambition than ever before. There was a whole world out there to explore, to observe, to conquer – and he had to do it. The world was a vast environment just waiting for someone to take ownership of it, so why not him? The only problem would be that he would not be able to live long enough to complete such a task and then relish in his own glory... or would he? By the time he had looked down at the ground again, the artifact was gone. The piece of metal had mysteriously vanished, but from then on, he knew how he would live his life. That artifact never crossed his conscience again, though in his subconscious, it reigned.

No one else would understand. He worked so hard to ascend to the throne, throwing away his teenage years of fun in pursuit of something grand and majestic. He worked so hard for something that death could easily take away from him. *A mortal body is an inefficient sack of cytoplasm and carbon,* he argued. *I must be something greater. I must ascend to a level beyond that of a normal human. I am here now because I worked for it! I worked my ass off to get to where I am now! I put my time in! I pushed harder than I could have ever conceived! My desire to conquer and become great is stronger than anyone else's! Not a single soul would be willing to put in the time to get to where I am, and I will not let mortality strip that away from me!*

It would all be worth it. Nothing mattered more than cementing his legacy. Let the citizens of Sarasaland fall into an abyss, let the lion's share of the world's population be slaughtered and massacred, and let the entire planet be plunged into a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Let everything come to ruin, as long as his name remains a constant

throughout time, as long as he was remembered and feared by all, as long as his legacy was forever ingrained in history. *My legacy continues building for as long as I live,* King Sarasa said in his mind. *And I will live on. I can't rely on my daughter to continue my work, so I have to ensure that I will. I will be above human. I am above human. I will be immortal...*

His scientists were in one of the medical buildings at this very moment working on anti-aging serums and immunity formulas for every disease known to man. The key to eternal life, the code for immortality, the invulnerability hack, it was somewhere in this world, and he knew it. Now employed were the best scientists and research funding he ever had during his tenure. He would find a way to escape death. If it meant transcending his body and becoming one with that of an android, then that would be what he would do.

Neva led the Kruna across the plains that reached from the Muda Mountains all the way over to the Great Canyon. The greenery that was so prominent near the mountains receded the closer they got to their destination. They were nearing the gorge, but they would need to find an optimal place to drop down, preferably an area with plenty of adjacent ledges.

The group trekked past the beginning of the Great Canyon when Neva glanced back and gestured for Andrew to join her up front. "Get up here, shade-maker," she said. When the Kruna of Shadow got close enough to her and far enough away from the group for anyone to hear, she hissed as a whisper, "Alright you. Do not, and I repeat, *do not,* tell anybody about what I did last night – I don't need anyone thinking I'm some softy like you, got it? You and Daisy keep quiet about it!" With a change in tone, she added, "But... thanks. That was really nice of you."

Andrew smiled as he whispered back, "I don't like it when people are upset. I'm definitely not a softy though."

"Uh, you definitely are," Neva mumbled. "Remember something; the first time I saw you, you were out cold!"

"I guess I can't argue with that," Andrew replied with a shrug. "By the way, are you hearing that noise?" The shadow wielder was referring to a faint yet harsh reverberation of metallic sounds coming from up ahead.

Neva recognized some of the sounds as the T-29 Remodeling Devices. *So the demon witch was being truthful after all,* she thought. She stopped in her tracks to allow the rest of the group to catch up. "Listen! Those T-29s of King Sarasa's are echoing throughout the area here! No doubt he must have some sort of elaborate base-bunker down in that ravine somewhere, so we're gonna scout around and destroy those mechanized weapons of his before we go for him!"

"Why don't we confront the king first?" asked Athelstan. "Destroying the machines will alert them of our presence and offer a chance for him to escape!"

"I agree," said Bowser. "Getting to King Sarasa first is the quickest way to victory."

"And going to the king first will more likely than not give him instant and fatal leverage on us all," Neva responded. "I know his tendencies; he'll order those weapons to activate and wreck the area even more while we're down there. He probably has an escape route set up. We do not. He'll get away while we – including most of his workers – are all cast into the chasm that will result." She started marching forward again, the Kruna all following right behind her. "Let's inch closer to the noise, but stop short of it and look for the most suitable way down."

"How many of those T-29s are there?" Bowser asked.

"Last I checked..." Neva began. "There must have been at least twenty. Not much more than that. They're difficult and time-consuming to make, so it's not like he's flooding the whole military with them. We have to destroy *all* of them now, while we have the chance. We may never get another opportunity like this. So let's wreck those T-29s!"

"Yeah!" Marut exclaimed, pulling out his ninjato. Although he

proceeded to display some decent – albeit overly excited – swordplay, he almost clipped Andrew with the blade.

"Marut!" Andrew shouted. "You're gonna kill somebody with that! This ain't a cartoon!"

Bowser looked at Andrew with a cocked eyebrow. "Do you know how wrong that statement is in this context?"

Neva and the Kruna eased their way closer to the mechanical sounds, hugging the edge of the canyon to try and catch sight of the easiest way down. The problem was that the canyon drop was almost entirely vertical, as if someone took a serrated knife and made a rugged cut into the surface of the planet. They were attacked at one point by a horde of Rexes incoming from the plains, but handled the purple dinos and fended them off without causing them much harm. A little further ways down and the elemental wielders found themselves closing in on a divergence in the canyon, a fork that angled the segment of land they were on away from the gorge and back to the west. One pathway of the gorge led into a downslope that opened up into a range of lowlands, but the other path led into the other section of the Great Canyon.

"We can't travel any further on the ground up here," said Neva. "We're gonna have to plunge down into the gorge now."

"And it looks like we're taking the path to the right, right?" Bowser suggested.

"Right," Neva replied. "So let's try and see how we can get down there..."

"I bet I could do something about making some extra platforms," proposed Athelstan.

Andrew stared at his Shadow Blades, taking note of the way the handles tied-in with the hilt and forearm attachments that remained after Toad's upgrade. He then got an idea and backed away from the group. He stopped several feet behind them and readied himself. *Thank you, Toad,* he thought.

"Anybody here have telescopic vision?" Bowser asked the group.

"I just said I can make the platforms to go down!" exclaimed the Kruna of Stone.

"I get that, but we should probably have an idea of what we're getting into down there," snapped Bowser. "Luma forbid we all run into a trap from either King Sarasa *or* Marissa!"

"Even if there isn't a trap, we could still get ambushed by the king's workers and guards," said Ramona. "So let's all just cautiously scout around the area as we make our way down-"

Before anyone even noticed what Andrew was up to, the Kruna of Shadow launched himself off the cliff and into the gorge with his Shadow Blades locked onto his shoes. Speeding along the sides of the rocky walls, he kept leaping and twisting, maneuvering and ricocheting off the walls as he descended deeper into the canyon.

"So what do you call that?" Athelstan remarked in reference to the descending shadow wielder. "Rock-skating? Rock-skiing?"

"Actually, 'impractical idiocy' is what I would call it," said Bowser. "If he's lucky, maybe he'll only ram into one wall of rock and only fall a hundred feet out of the air instead of a thousand!"

"I didn't even know he could do that with those blades!" Warra commented.

"I don't think he knew it himself either!" Ramona remarked, wide-eyed. "Did Toad know?"

"I like that though!" exclaimed Athelstan, getting giddy. "I need to be able to do something like that! It's my element anyways!"

"Uh, I don't think so," Neva muttered. "You stone wielders don't really tend to be very... aerodynamically inclined."

"Or agile enough for that matter," Warra added.

"YEAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!" Marut screamed. As swiftly as his shadow counterpart, Marut charged ahead through the group with

both his Gust Boomerangs in each hand and leapt off the cliff high into the sky, headfirst into the drop. "WEEEEEEEEEEE-HOO-HOO-HOO-HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" The Kruna of Air angled himself into the sides of the canyon on his way down to redirect his trajectory and minimize shock, using his boomerangs where he could as hooks to whip back and forth between ledges and to opposite sides of the canyon. Both Andrew and Marut's movements were erratic and improvised, but their descents were controlled and without a hitch.

"Well, there's wall jumping, and, I guess now, wall falling," Bowser condescendingly said. "So for us sane people up here, what do you guys think?"

"I think we can walk down," said Warra. Athelstan struck his Avalanche Spear into the ground to erect a makeshift staircase leading down to the next closest edge. Neva and the rest of the Kruna hurried down the path that Athlestan made. With each edge they reached, Athelstan ripped free stone to make new staircases, bridges, or other assorted platforms for them all to descend down as deep into the canyon as they needed to go.

Andrew careened along the steep, nearly vertical walls of the Great Canyon, nearing the floor. As soon as he touched down, he twisted and put on the brakes to skid to a halt. His body was jarred from the descent, and he didn't have much energy available to help brace against the laws of physics, but for the most part, he was fine.

"Man, I need to save that for an actual hill, not a drop like that," he muttered. He looked down at his feet to examine how well his Shadow Blades took the ride. The tools held up well, looking like they just came out of the shop. He looked back behind him and saw the faint trail he had made on the way down. "Toad, you are seriously the dude. If all turns out well here in Sarasaland, we owe him big time."

"GERONIMOOOOOO!" Marut screamed, closing in fast as he whipped around in the air. "REMEMBER THE TITANS!"

"Look at this fool..." Andrew mumbled, trying to suppress a laugh.

With about a dozen more jumps off of walls and redirections with his boomerangs, Marut touched down on the ground near the Kruna of Shadow. He then twirled his boomerangs around in his hands before clipping them back to his belt.

"Make some more noise while you're at it!" snapped Andrew. "I'm sure everyone wants to know that we're here!"

"Oh, right, sorry," Marut mumbled with a giggle. "I'm good. I'm good. But that was a pretty sick ride, wasn't it?"

"Oh yeah," replied Andrew. "Without a doubt."

"So what do you think we should do now?" Marut asked. He looked around to get a survey of the area. Like they saw from above, the canyon route split off into two directions; one towards the left and leading into an open field, and the other going right as a continuation of the gorge. Marut was not sure, but he thought he saw some form of sentient movement way down the right path. Judging by the direction the sounds seemed to be coming from, the T-29s had to be in that direction. "I think that's where King Sarasa and his people are," he said, pointing with his finger.

"Well, obviously," said Andrew. "I mean, that's the only path through which the canyon continues at this point, but I doubt that they're all gonna be lined up down that one path the further we go down into it. It's possible that they could have created a whole maze of paths up that way." He knelt down to detach the blades from his feet. "Let's wait for the others to get down here and see how they wanna do this."

Chapter XVII

Canyon Crusade :

"This is your last chakra before backtracking to chakra one and chakra three," Geno said to Daisy. "Your seventh chakra, your crown chakra, is what we will be dealing with next."

"I'm ready," Daisy replied. She seemed to be more sure of herself now. The Betedaimon transformation had rattled her mentality, but her old self was starting to shine through to the surface. She was not as angry and angsty as she was right after the change. It was almost as if, except for her physical body, the transformation never happened. But it did happen, and there were still goals Daisy needed to accomplish in this form that had to be met before she could revert back. Daisy kept reminding herself that the time spent working with Geno would payoff, even if she didn't know how at the time. *I just need to trust that my team'll be able to handle things until I'm back on the field,* she thought.

"Seventh chakra," murmured Geno with a deep breath. "The crown chakra emanates from the top of your head. You are spiritually awakened when this chakra is not blocked, but when it is blocked, you are spiritually depressed. This is a very important chakra, Daisy. Its significance can not be understated or written off, for it sets the foundation for many of the qualities you should look to obtain in the future. Unfortunately, this is the easiest chakra to have issues with. Note that feelings of unimportance – of purposeless and unknown identity – will block this chakra in its entirety."

And then Geno saw something that astounded him more than what had happened not too long ago. With almost as much quickness as her sixth chakra, her seventh chakra gave off a sign of purification and open flow. The white illumination covering Daisy shone its translucent brilliance and evaporated, once again leaving Geno in awe. This time, Daisy was aware of the chakra's purification. Her facial expression was intense.

"I can't believe this!" Geno exclaimed. "You've purified the forehead and crown chakras in record time! How could you have accomplished such a feat?!"

"I know my purpose," Daisy said, quiet in volume but steely in tone. "I know what I have to do."

"Amazing, Kruna," Geno said under his breath. "Simply amazing. I'm not going to question you, but we can't stop now. You know what's next."

Daisy nodded. "One and three. I'll get right on it." And the end of her sentence, her attention and focus was drawn inside of her once more.

What have I just witnessed? Geno wondered. *This development is astonishing! And yet, it's equally perplexing. It just doesn't make sense. You spent practically no time at all purifying the forehead and crown chakras – provided they weren't clean and clear beforehand, that of which neither you nor I can tell – despite them being the hardest and most troublesome to have to unblock! Why did your sixth and seventh chakras get purified so effortlessly, but you struggled with the first and third? Does this mean you will now purify the remaining two with matching speed?* He stared at Daisy's concentration for a few moments. It was not clear to him how her second attempts on the remaining chakras would turn out, but it wasn't long before he was able to read into the Kruna of Earth and pick up on something that was not apparent at first glance. *I sense inner turmoil, Sarasa. These last two chakras will not come nearly as easy as the others...*

Neva and the rest of the Kruna, having reached the floor by way of Athelstan's various stairs, platforms, and bridges, had regrouped with Marut and Andrew and were moving up the gorge of the Great Canyon. Warra was thoroughly displeased to find a lack of water on the floor, putting him at a disadvantage once again. "Alright," he muttered. "Hopefully, we'll find our next major enemy near a waterfall."

"We have to deal with what's in front of us first," said Bowser. "This may prove to be more difficult than we're all thinking it will be, but if we act with precision and purpose, we should get through with our business here without too much of an issue. To be honest, I'm looking forward to seeing this, King Sarasa, in person, face to face. I wanna make sure that happens."

Neva perked up a bit. "And why's that? Any reason in particular?"

"Because," Bowser murmured. "I wanna check something out..." He gave no further explanation. His gaze was focused on the passage ahead. Neva was going to say something to the Kruna of Fire, but decided not to.

The gorge up ahead continued for almost another mile before opening up into a somewhat more spacious area. At this point, several groups of workers became visible. Past the immediate groups of King Sarasa's people, the canyon appeared to split down the middle into four separate ravines.

"Look at all this," Ramona whispered. "Engineers, scientists, mechanics, architects, soldiers, laborers, guards; it's like a whole sector of the military is here!"

"T-29 spotted," Neva said under her breath. She pointed at the far left on a high ledge where the massive machine rested. "Looks like it was driven or towed up there. So we can assume they'll be scattered about around the area in a similar manner."

"We'll destroy that first T-29," stated Warra. "Then, after we've cleared the area, we're going to have to split up, two to three paths, and then one for the remaining path."

"As a reminder, we will not kill; we will incapacitate," Bowser ordered. "These people here are just following commands from someone who really shouldn't be in charge, so they should not have to pay such an unfair price."

Neva closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Alright, you heard him,* the ice wielder thought to herself. *Set to stun, Neva.*

"Feel free to light up any T-29 RD that you see!" Andrew added. All of the elemental wielders readied their tools and refocused their energies as they prepared to engage King Sarasa's forces.

"And if anyone finds King Sarasa, shoot an elemental blast up into the air," said Warra. "Do *not* confront him until all T-29's have been demolished!"

King Sarasa waltzed around his section of the armory, located at the far northern end of the Great Canyon. It was in this area that the gorge sloped down and opened out into the forested plains further north that would eventually lead into Chai Kingdom boundaries. Such an opening was gated and heavily guarded to prevent what would be easy access to potential trespassers, but King Sarasa liked using this area as the armory's headquarters in case a quick escape was needed. Although there were some bases set up in this area for the work he required, most were deep inside the canyon. After the initial creation of the Great Canyon, King Sarasa and his men had carved out several diverse passages in the northern half of the gorge. All the T-29 Remodeling Devices were kept hidden in this canyon maze, taken out for use only when necessary.

The king took pride in the hard work and obedience of all his people, even though he often took it for granted. The people he kept employed in the Great Canyon were some of his best, most revered workers. Given the circumstances and contents of the canyon and his plans, he had to make sure he had only the most trustworthy of men and women here. He knew when he needed to weed out any potential troublemakers that ever decided to show their true colors.

Vastus and his assistant deputy, a blue Pianta named Blume, marched up to converse with the king. It was the first time King Sarasa had saw either one of them for the day. Judging by the height of the sun, he was expecting a routine noon report from the two of them.

"I do hope you're going to give me some good findings on the status of our work," said King Sarasa. "Isn't that right, police commissioner?"

"I would like to say that, and just that," responded Vastus. "But I can't stop there, unfortunately..."

"Is there a problem?" the king asked. "Or are you going to sit there and complain about up north like you've been doing much of as of late?"

"Actually, I'm hearing reports that a lot of our people at Castle Town are getting restless," answered Vastus. "They've become increasingly so since the stir at 2SU a couple days ago."

"If you weren't spending so much time here working on elemental weapons, you would've known that," Blume muttered.

King Sarasa raised an eyebrow at the assistant deputy. "That is an unusual tone of voice for you, Blume. Don't get used to using it."

"King, I seriously think you need to take a step back and reflect on some of this here," Blume said. "Don't you think we've demonstrated enough military might? Nobody wants to mess with us as we are now – strike that; nobody is trying to mess with us as we are now. Though, they'll be happy to do so if we keep acting like an empire instead of a nation. So before we go and do something that'll push the planet closer to an episode of worldwide war, I suggest we focus on other needs."

"Other needs..." King Sarasa grumbled. "What... other needs...?"

"Let's talk about Sarasaland life!" Blume asserted. "You know, from where I came from, the citizens were treated like *real* people, not like pawns!"

King Sarasa shot Blume a very icy look. Vastus immediately realized what the Pianta was doing wrong. The police commissioner had been around long enough to know what happens to those who challenge the king's will. Blume though, was relatively new, and had not had much previous interaction with the king.

"The people of Sarasaland, of all kingdoms, provinces, and newly annexed territories, are vital to our cause," said King Sarasa, his voice becoming startlingly low. "They are not pawns. They are the

life force of our nation."

"So then our nation's dead, is what you're saying?" Blume snapped. By this time, a dozen or so of the engineers and guards had started to make their way towards the developing disturbance between the king and the Pianta.

"Please disregard my inexperienced deputy, King Sarasa," Vastus pleaded. "He means no harm."

"Look, I don't know what you're up to, 'King,' but you gotta realize that it's not gonna work," said Blume. "And if people start catching on, you're gonna have thousands upon thousands of people bombarding the doors of the Central Castle-"

Blume felt two people grab at his arms and force them behind his back before he could finish his statement. Two more people came up to him and grabbed hold of his shoulders. "Hey, what is this?" the Pianta nervously asked. "What's going on here?"

"Execution," replied King Sarasa. "The death penalty for rebellious vermin is inflexible."

"What?" Blume cried out. "Execution? I'm not rebellious! I love Sarasaland! Are you kidding me? The bountiful buffets, the expansive housing, the contagiousness of the people's joy, the distribution of wealth and prosperity, man! This place is awesome! I'll proudly recite the Sarasaland national anthem! C'mon, Vastus! Sing it with me now! OUR COUNTRY REEKS OF TREES; neh-neh-neh-neh-something LIBERTY! It's really nice – here!"

"You're not even close," muttered King Sarasa. "Goodbye, anarchist."

"What? No!" Blume yelled as he was dragged off by the group of workers and guards. "This isn't right! This is unjust! You guys gotta stop this!" Blume continued complaining and then screaming, attracting attention from all around. None of it did any good, and he was carried off south into the canyon labyrinth. He let out one final, guttural scream before he was reduced to crying and wailing.

"Did you hear that?" one of the scientists said. "He almost made a Wilhelm Scream!"

"Let this be a lesson to you all!" King Sarasa boomed. "We do not entertain traitors and treasonists in Sarasaland! Kindly resume your work, and your efforts will build upon your future payoff."

As Blume was taken out of sight to a fate unknown, everyone resumed their business. King Sarasa returned to surveying the immediate area without a second thought given to the Pianta he just sent away. Vastus went on back in the direction of the heart of the Great Canyon Armory, wondering who the traitor in the midst really was.

Just as Geno had expected, Daisy was once more having difficulty cleansing her root and solar plexus chakras. Oddly enough, she was having more trouble now than she was the first go around. Her concentration, which had been impeccable for the better part of the afternoon, broke, and a small portion of her energy flared up and shoved her back. She caught herself with her arms before flopping on her back, but she did not look all too happy regardless.

"What was that?" Geno asked. "Chakras. Chakras! Don't involve your elemental energy!"

"I'm sorry!" Daisy snapped. "It's not like I was doing it on purpose! Geez!"

"It's alright, Kruna," assured Geno. "Just keep at it. Don't get discouraged."

"Man, this sucks!" Daisy groaned. "I wanna be out there, fighting with my team, my friends – not stuck here purifying chakras! They're on a mission that I need to be a part of!"

"You'll have your chance," Geno said. "But for right now, it is crucial that you finish cleansing your life force."

With a bestial growl and an irritated snarl, Daisy slammed her arms down onto the floor. "I've never been one to have patience! And I

definitely don't have the patience to be sitting here when I need to be out on the field!"

"You'll never make any progress towards strengthening yourself and reverting back to normal if you keep acting up like that."

Daisy sighed, visibly angered and upset. "You're right. I'm sorry. I should obviously know better! I just don't know what's gotten into me lately! Oh... that's right – some kind of feral animal!" Incensed, she let out another growl and delivered a heavy punch into the ground. Geno decided that Daisy needed to calm her own self down and waited on her to do so. It her took several moments to relax, though she did adhere to Geno's tutelage and resumed her efforts with her chakras under his watch. Still, there was mounting tension on the beastly Kruna's face.

She's spent almost an hour now working on one and three, Geno thought. *She's becoming increasingly frustrated and flustered...*

Marut created a massive down draft of air from above that turned the gorge into a wind tunnel and knocked several of King Sarasa's workers off of their feet. Seizing the opportunity, Bowser readied a beam of plasma from the clutches of his Blazer Claws and took aim at the T-29 Remodeling Device high on the ledge. An explosion resulted, reducing the elemental weapon to a fiery heap and drawing mixed complaints and curses from the workers. Most of the workers ran into the four split passages to offer warnings to the rest of the secret armory, but the couple dozen or so that remained to confront the Kruna had no chance. Athelstan brought down part of the canyon wall in an avalanche, forcing all the workers to scatter and dive. A handful of them came at the Kruna with laser drills armed and ready for the takedown, but all it took was a thin sheen of ice from Neva to send the attackers careening into the rock face.

"Area clear!" Bowser shouted. "Let's split up and destroy every T-29 we come across!"

Being the fastest and swiftest on the team, Marut opted to go by himself to ensure he wouldn't get slowed down and went for the

passage furthest to the left. Ramona and Andrew headed down the pathway to the far right, Bowser and Neva went for the path just offset from the middle, and Warra and Athelstan ran towards the wide passage straight down the center of the divide.

Vastus noticed a small plume of smoke drifting up into the air before it evaporated into the atmosphere. "Well that's just great. Another malfunction. King, these T-29s are very difficult to make!"

"They are," King Sarasa replied. "But they are worth the payoff when their construction is properly executed. The way I see it, if the machine blows up in your face, you deserved it."

Vastus nodded. "But of course, my king."

As if on cue, one of the components an engineer was working on short-circuited and electrocuted her. She fell to the ground, paralyzed. Her partners called for nearby staff to help transport her to a medical bunker, though no one displayed any sign of grief or remorse. Mistakes like that were not frequent, but were not uncommon either.

"Just as I said," commented the king. "It'll be a nice story to tell her friends in a bar one day."

Vastus jumped, his eyes shifting around in the direction southward. He thought he had heard something akin to a harsh, grating sound, as if something had combusted or exploded. It was too far away to tell for sure though, so he disregarded it. King Sarasa, being nothing more than an average earth wielder, was unable to detect the seismic vibrations in the ground that had resulted from the disturbance. It would have been a telltale sign of trouble if he knew how to read into the planet's surface.

Several moments later, both Vastus and King Sarasa heard something again. This time, Vastus was able to tell that it was some sort of explosion. "Two malfunctions in the span of two minutes?" stated the police commissioner. "Is that normal?"

"It most certainly is not," replied the king. "The boneheads working on these things have to realize at some point that this stuff costs money! You can't just take a tool and a random piece of tech and go all willy-nilly up to the-"

King Sarasa was cut off by the faint sound of another explosion off in almost the same direction as the previous two. This one managed to catch the attention of some of the workers. Neither King Sarasa nor Vastus knew what to make of the situation.

"Hey!" one of the mechanics called out. "Who keeps saying the secret word?"

"Shut up, Tom!" King Sarasa shouted. "This is not the time for your foolishness!"

"Did we get bad imports of titanium?" Vastus wondered aloud. "Or maybe the alkaline supply was tainted?"

Three more explosions occurred in rapid succession, drawing attention from the rest of King Sarasa's crew. It now became clear to everyone in the northernmost section of the Great Canyon that the explosions were no coincidence. There were intruders running amok, and they were on the offensive.

Warra and Athelstan ran further up the wide ravine, having succeeded in taking out two T-29s. Athelstan was causing all sorts of disturbances and chaos, using the supply of the canyon rock to his advantage. The Kruna of Stone looked like he was enjoying himself.

"Fantastic!" cheered Athelstan. "This is easier than that time I won a Megaton Punch match against that scrub from the Donut Plains!"

"You look like you're having way more fun with this than you really should," Warra joked.

"Of course I am!" Athelstan replied. He caught sight of another T-29 perched high overhead on a platform. Instead of running up the available roadway to get to it, the brown-clothed fighter simply

twirled his Avalanche Spear around and struck it into the canyon wall. The ground underneath the T-29 crumbled and collapsed down to the ground in a hurry, but Athelstan put a little too much elbow grease into the strike and caused a larger rockslide than was necessary. Warra yanked Athelstan by the arm and darted backwards to get them both out of harm's way. The T-29 exploded the moment it smashed into the ground and got pummeled by debris.

"Let's try to keep our focus on the elemental weapons and not on ourselves!" Warra exclaimed.

"Sorry!" Athelstan hollered with a hearty laugh. There was something about the amusement of the big, burly stone wielder that seemed childlike and carefree.

"Well, don't be so sorry," said Warra. "This was the widest path, so that means we'll probably come across the most T-29s."

"Yeah!" Athelstan yelled as the two maneuvered around the wreckage to continue on their way. "I'm about to turn it loose!"

Ramona and Andrew were more direct and precise with their offensive, acting like mobile snipers as they took aim on the second T-29 they came across and shot at it with bolts of light and shadow. The workers and guards ran the moment they saw the bursts of power jet through the air; instant reactions to two trespassers they were previously unaware of.

Since the T-29 was on the ground, the colossal explosion that followed ate into the side of the rock face, triggering a quick and deadly collapse of part of the canyon wall. As the rest of the workers fled the scene to avoid getting crushed by boulders and heaps of rock. Andrew grabbed Ramona and dashed away from the incoming debris. He was not quick enough to get all the way out of the radius of the splash damage, so he covered Ramona and turned his back to act as a human shield for her. By the end of the event, Andrew had taken a handful of shots to the back from some of the stone chunks.

"Thanks," Ramona said. "We would've both been flattened!"

Andrew winced in pain. "I just didn't want my friend getting pulverized is all."

"How badly are you hurt?" Ramona asked. "I'm so sorry; I should've been able to move out of the way-"

Before she could finish, Ramona caught sight of a guard behind Andrew jumping over the scattered heaps of rock and running towards them with his sword at ready. Letting out a quick gasp, she whipped Andrew to the side and pulled out her broadsword in reverse-grip fashion to parry, all in one, instinctual motion. Switching back to a conventional grip, she smacked the guard in his shoulder with the flat of her blade, knocking him to the ground.

"Whoa, that's a pretty slick move!" Andrew said in praise.

"I... didn't know what I was doing just now," Ramona stuttered. "I just didn't want my friend getting cut up like deli meat is all..."

The two Kruna stared at each other for a few moments, then started giggling at one another. Then their giggling broke out into full on laughter.

"You idiot!" King Sarasa snapped at Vastus. "You moron! How could you let this happen?"

"Me? What – What did I do?" Vastus stammered.

"You were in charge of setting up defensive measures at the southern end of the Canyon Armory entrance!" exclaimed the king.

"And I did!" yelled Vastus. "I set up defenses to keep intruders away from the inner Great Canyon!" As he was talking, two more explosions occurred. These most recent explosions sounded like they were much closer than the previous ones.

"Well there go your defenses!" shouted the king. "I wonder how they break through!"

Vastus threw his arms up. "I don't know! No defense is bulletproof!"

"Never say that in front of an earth wielder!" King Sarasa scolded.

"The hell do you mean 'No defense is bulletproof?' " one of the mechanics hollered. "Have you *watched* football?"

"Shut up, Tom!" King Sarasa snapped. "We don't need your sass right now!"

"I'm just saying!" Tom shouted back. Another explosion went off, this one even closer than the others. Vastus looked up and saw increasing plumes of smoke overtaking the mostly cloudy sky.

"Who could have known about our secret base?" King Sarasa thought aloud. "This area is reserved and off-limits to the general public! Who would be trying to attack us now?"

"I think, 'why,' is the better question," commented Vastus.

King Sarasa started grunting in frustration. ' *Why' is a good question indeed,* he said in his mind. *'Why' and 'How...'*

A column of fire blew through the passageway leading into the labyrinth of the Great Canyon before flaring into the air in a majestic and awe-inspiring display. From the passage emerged Bowser and Neva, pleased with the five T-29s they managed to destroy but more elated that they chose to take the path that led directly to the Great Canyon Armory's headquarters. King Sarasa narrowed his eyes on the approaching threats just as Bowser and Neva caught sight of him. Though he recognized the small girl in white and light blue from the confrontation at Sarasaland State University, his eyes focused on the larger figure in crimson and black with the shell and claws.

"Everyone!" Vastus shouted. "Destroy the intruders!"

"No!" King Sarasa boomed. "Stand down. Keep the area clear." Without diverting his gaze, he clutched his hip holster to make sure his Quake Breakers were on his person, then waited in place. Bowser and Neva marched closer to the King of Sarasaland until they were less than twenty yards away.

"Welcome," hissed King Sarasa. With an angry smirk, he added, "Friends..."

"No need for the welcome wagon," said Neva. "We've already made ourselves at home."

Marut was doing an excellent job, operating like an efficient machine. Putting his tremendous speed and agility to use, he was able to zip through the Great Canyon and demolish eight T-29s. With a combination of offensive and counter tactics, he was making short work of the marginal resistance put up by the workers and guards.

The Kruna of Air did notice something very odd about the enemies that stood between him and the T-29s. There was something about their essence that seemed lacking. He couldn't tell if it was them being careless about whatever happened or if they were just soulless drones without any sort of inspiration. They all seemed to attack or defend half-heartedly, as if they were faithless and nonchalant about fighting in the name of King Sarasa. They were definitely loyal, but they almost seemed like they were loyal because they forced themselves to be, or because they didn't know any other way. Marut wondered about this and more as he sped through the gorge.

The next thing Marut knew, he entered an area that strangely appeared to be cleared out already. Bodies were scattered about, and the two T-29s that were in the area were already destroyed. The Kruna of Air was certain that he hadn't circled around or intercepted any of the other paths that his teammates went through yet. *Someone beat me here!* he thought. *Was it actually one of the other Kruna?* He looked around and did not see a single moving being.

Upon closer inspection, Marut saw that there were streaks and puddles of blood everywhere. The limp bodies scattered about did not only appear motionless, but lifeless. It was then that Marut came to the conclusion that the people that were here had all been killed. What made things more horrific was that he clearly remembered him and his team agreeing to non-lethal pacification of any and all of

King Sarasa's workers and guards.

Seeing as how that's the case, then why are there all these bodies gutted and tossed aside? Marut wondered. He was starting to feel the adrenaline-noradrenaline response spike within him. Something was horribly wrong. *Either one of my friends just went crazy... or someone else is here...*

His eyes darted around the area, the eerie quiet starting to chill his spine. *Oh, why did I go alone?* he wondered. *Air wielders are not supposed to be alone!*

A childish, playful little giggle echoed and reverberated through the gorge, spooking Marut even further. Accompanying the recurring chuckling and laughter was a thick, knee-high haze that developed and rose up from the ground. Now, all the dead bodies were barely even visible under the coat of translucent silver.

"... Are you frightened..." a voice cooed.

"Ramona?" Marut called out. "Is that you? This is not like you at all, you know!"

No response came. Marut shuddered as he felt a chilling finger run down the center of his back. He whipped around to slash with one of his boomerangs, but struck nothing but air.

"... Fear me..." the voice murmured.

"Neva?" Marut asked, darting around. He was starting to feel numb with pressure. Within seconds, it was obvious that whoever was messing with him was not the ice wielder.

"... Fear... for your life..." was the next unseen whisper.

Marut shuffled his boomerangs into one hand and pulled out his ninjato, preparing for whatever was going to happen next. It didn't matter to the person stalking him though. She had him at her mercy.

"... I am here..."

On the ground in front of him, a steamy black and red portal opened

through which Lord Arkana eased up from. Arms crossed with a wicked grin on her face, her entrance from the portal sounded like the hiss resulting from the heat of hellfires meeting the cold air of Hell's freezer. The mist and haze increased in density and breadth, shrouding the environment around them.

Marissa locked eyes with Marut, her gaze haunting, terrifying, and alluring all at once. "I believe this is the first time we've met," she cooed. "You better pray this is not the last time."

"I suppose you two are the ones behind the explosions back there," King Sarasa asked Bowser and Neva.

"Yes," the little ice wielder responded. She aimed her crossbow to blast a wide burst of frost into the air. "But we had some help."

King Sarasa nodded, a frown plastered on his face. "And, might I ask who deems themselves audacious enough to not only cause such a destructive disturbance but to also confront me head-on?"

"I am the Koopa King and the Kruna of Fire!" Bowser declared, flaring his Blazer Claws. "You can call me, Bowser!"

"Bizarre choice for a Kruna," King Sarasa muttered. "You know, I had a very good team of them here acting as defenders for Sarasaland in the past."

"What happened to them?" asked Bowser.

"Exactly what was supposed to," the king answered. "They defended Sarasaland just as their job description demanded. But they will be remembered for their loyalty! You don't find loyalty like theirs anymore nowadays..." He shifted his head to stare down Neva. "And you – state your identity!"

Neva put the backs of her hands to her hips and puffed out her chest. "I am Neva! And you invaded my homeland province, Twilight City!"

"I did?" King Sarasa asked. "I've conquered so many of the smaller

nations around Sarasaland and have been so busy looking ahead at future conquests that I can't keep track of all these places!"

Twilight City, huh? Bowser thought. *Well, that explains that premium high-tech Frost Crossbow of hers.*

"That's funny, little girl," King Sarasa muttered. "I remember seeing you with my daughter a couple days ago. She wouldn't happen to be here as a part of your group, would she?"

"No," the ice wielder replied. "But she's preparing herself to take you down as we speak!"

King Sarasa burst out in laughter. "You don't honestly expect me to believe that my daughter is any sort of a threat to me! A nuisance that must be put down? Yes! But a threat? That's comedic genius!"

"Hey, your daughter is a Kruna too!" Bowser snapped. "Make no mistake, she *can* and *will* bring you to your knees – that is of course, if I don't do it."

"That worthless brat, a Kruna?" King Sarasa grunted, laughter reduced to chuckling. "First you intrude and wreak havoc on my armory, and now you're trying to feed me horrid, tasteless jokes."

"She's a better earth wielder than you'll ever be!" Neva exclaimed.

King Sarasa's eyes narrowed as he scowled, "Terran taught her the basics and nothing more."

"And Terran was a better father than you ever were!" yelled Bowser.

"Terran was a bad influence that corrupted her mind and diverted her from her true destiny," the King of Sarasaland spat. "She was already a disobedient delinquent, and Terran made it worse!" He then smiled, adding, "And why are you getting so defensive?"

"Because people like you make me sick," Bowser responded, voice escalating. "Because people like you are what make the world as troubled and scarred as it is. Because I was on my way to turning out just like you, but with the help of some friends, a duty to a higher cause, and the kindness, empathy, and forgiveness of others, I am

as far from being like you as I have ever been! I have a right to be defensive! Daisy's my friend, just like the rest of my fellow Kruna and just like the people waiting for me back home! If it weren't for Daisy, this planet would be in the midst of an apocalyptic nightmare! Why don't you give your daughter the respect and acknowledgment that she deserves?"

What are you doing? Neva thought as she turned to stare at the seething Kruna of Fire. *We're not trying to hold a counseling session!*

King Sarasa clapped his hands at a slow, unimpressed pace. He was showing growing indignation."Very good, koopa. I should nominate you for the Nobel Peace Prize. But now, why don't we discuss something of substance; namely, why are you here? Besides trying to nag me about parenting, that is."

Bowser tried suppressing his anger, but encountered difficulty in doing so. He struggled trying to grapple with the concept of King Sarasa's character. What he had in his parents when they were alive were loving, nurturing role models. King Sarasa on the other hand appeared to be a selfish, nonchalant, absent father. Judging from what Daisy had said in the past, her mother was not too different. And just like that, Bowser began to understand Daisy on a new, deeper level than before.

"We came here to destroy your T-29s," murmured Bowser. "We came here to defeat you... but... I also wanted to check something out..."

King Sarasa said nothing. He simply stood there, arms crossed, not giving any effort to hiding the annoyance he was feeling.

Tension rose in Bowser's jaw. "I wanted to see... how I would actually feel... if I stood before what I was becoming. I wanted to see what I would have become if I kept on my way, if I had kept on that path I was on, the *wrong* path..."

The scattered workers and guards had been listening to the entire exchange between Bowser, Neva, and King Sarasa. Muffled conversations broke out among a few isolated groups. The overall

tone among the people was one of worry, confusion, and question. The King of Sarasaland was not going to hold his tongue in front of the two elemental wielders that dared to challenge him, and he would have been far too late to do so anyways. He glanced at Vastus, quickly beaming his eyes before returning his gaze to the girl and koopa before him. Vastus nodded and went to go and quell the disturbances and concerns that had risen.

"Let me ask you something," Bowser said. "Why are you so determined to invade and conquer other lands?"

"I'm exercising my strength!" King Sarasa responded. "That's why I am a king, and *you* are a pretender."

"That's where you're wrong," the Kruna of Fire replied with a smirk. "Strength does not come from controlling others. Strength does not come from conquering the weak. Just because someone is weak does not mean you can have your way with them. You've got to assist them and lend a helping hand." He leapt forward ahead of Neva and slashed through the air, igniting his claws. "Now let me show you why I am strong, and why you are not."

I journeyed to the Mushroom Kingdom to seek vengeance for my defeat and for the loss of my Scroll of Souls... and I arrived to find that the earth wielder in question was not there.

The archfiend had only been marching through Sarasa field for less than a half hour when he stumbled upon a backpack at the side of the path. Irrespective of his right forearm brace, two new, prominent features adorned the Soul Stealer since his encounter with Mario and Luigi. He now carried a backpack of his own that appeared to be filled with... something, and around his neck was now the worst possible gem that could have fallen into his possession.

Kokoro bent down, picked up the abandoned bag, and opened it to investigate. It didn't take long for him to notice that extra sets of the Kruna of Earth's apparel were within; items that he recognized without difficulty. He also noticed a map nestled under the clothes. Further inspection revealed that Sarasaland was marked on the

map, telling Kokoro all he needed to know. The moment he had been waiting for was nearing fruition.

I am coming, the Soul Stealer grumbled in thought. *If she is wise, she will tremble. There's no escape this time...*

Chapter XVIII

Checkmate :

On Bowser's request, Neva leapt backwards and away. The Kruna of Fire wanted to take down the Sarasaland monarch in a one-on-one duel. Now the two kings stood against each other in a face off, the workers and guards silent and watching with attentive nervousness.

Bowser, preferring a balanced approach in combat, stayed back and deferred the first move to King Sarasa. The koopa crouched down and raised his Blazer Claws in defense, expecting an attack within a matter of seconds. Instead, the King of Sarasaland unlimbered his twin Quake Breakers and got into a defensive stance of his own. The serrated teeth on the king's tools looked ready to slice through the entire canyon if that was what he decided to do. *Intimidating equipment indeed,* Bowser thought. *But that doesn't mean you know how to use them.*

King Sarasa raised a foot and took a giant step forward, but maintained his defensive stature. The two kings were both very large figures. King Sarasa and Athelstan were both about the same size, and Athelstan was very close in size to Bowser himself. The Kruna of Fire then wondered if Daisy had actually inherited some of her physical prowess from the man he stood against. *But Daisy is a vast improvement over him,* thought Bowser. *Strength and endurance were probably the only things that were passed down, because nine times out of ten, Daisy would've attacked by now. This guy is showing all defense; polar opposites. He's going to wait for me to attack, but I'm waiting for him to attack...*

It became evident to Neva that the battle between the two kings was going to be anything but conventional. It was going to be a chess match. It was going to be a tactical, strategic chess match to see who can break through who's strategy and defense first.

King Sarasa took another large step towards his opponent and

switched his stance up, but still remained ready for a defensive move. Bowser took a step back in response and hunched over a little more. The King of Sarasaland twirled around his implements a handful of times, albeit in a jerky fashion due to their irregular design. To answer, Bowser brought his claws together and ripped them away from each other to send sparks flying a short distance through the air. The gestures between the two were for accomplishing nothing more than to size each other up.

"For Heaven's sake!" Neva screamed. "Somebody throw an attack already! I'm staring at you two staring at each other!"

Bowser focused more flames through his Blazer Claws, deciding that his priority would be to disarm the king of his Quake Breakers. The fires around his claws turned green, indicating the preparation of his Fanning Torch technique. King Sarasa gave the koopa an odd look, unsure of what his opponent was about to do.

From within the palms of both Blazer Claws formed the two green fireballs, sizzling and crackling, ready to burst. Bowser took aim and threw the balls of flame that immediately dropped and scorched along the ground on their way to their target. *He's going to try and block,* Bowser assured to himself.

Instead, the king sidestepped out of the way, and then leapt further to the side before the fireballs exploded and sprayed their flames out in a rushing swath-like burst. Bowser was caught off guard by the maneuver, but was otherwise unimpressed with its execution.

This guy's no better than an intermediate elemental wielder for sure, the koopa mused. He formed two more Fanning Torch spheres, this time only throwing one. King Sarasa shifted back to his original spot to evade the fireball and the resulting blast radius when it burst open. Although still armed with the other green fireball ready and waiting, Bowser did not release it. The koopa kept it churning in his palm as he took a handful of steps to the side opposite his foe.

He's testing me, King Sarasa thought. *He's throwing out obvious attacks to try and form connections and patterns with my movements. Crafty Kruna...* He put his Quake Breakers back on his hips and wiggled his hands. *But you see, koopa, I am the one who's*

supposed to be analyzing and dissecting you.

King Sarasa did the best he could to pull what scarce organic earth elementals and sediments were scattered throughout the stone-dominant area so that he could form a large, handheld shield of peat and clay. He exhausted a bit of extra energy to fortify the shield and bolt it together before arming himself with it. "Come!" he demanded.

If I didn't know any better, your ultra conservative approach would make me think that you're a little too cautious, thought Neva. *We'll have to see if this develops into tangible fear...*

Bowser leapt high into the air, his arc of flight in-line with that of his opponent's position. King Sarasa held his ground, waiting for the koopa's move. As he dropped from the air, Bowser stuck both of his legs straight out to stomp down on top of the king. The move would have been sufficient to pummel King Sarasa into the ground had he not deflected with his shield of earth. Surprised by the strength of the shield and by the distance he was knocked back, Bowser retaliated with a midair backflip that ended in the hurling of his remaining Fanning Torch sphere. As the koopa flew backwards, the green fireball dropped to the ground and bolted towards King Sarasa. The king defended himself by throwing down his shield to meet the incoming projectile. The flames and earth collided, creating a small but wide explosion of fiery matter. Bowser landed on the ground and saw that King Sarasa was unharmed.

"That was some strong dirt," grumbled the Kruna of Fire.

"Naturally," King Sarasa remarked, redrawing his tools. Bowser charged forward with his claws out and threw a slash once he was within striking distance. King Sarasa got his tools up to block and pushed back the Kruna, momentarily throwing him off balance. Bowser recovered in time to catch one of King Sarasa's swings and imposed his will upon the king to force the monarch back. The koopa advanced now, taking diagonal swipes with both of his claws, only to find each blow countered by King Sarasa.

"If there's one thing you're good at for sure, it's blocking!" Bowser grunted between slashes. He then brought down both claws at once on top of his opponent's tools and tried to force him back again. With

a nasty smirk, King Sarasa activated the sawing function of his tools, creating a harsh, grating sound as metal ran up against metal. Sensing that something was wrong, Bowser disconnected and leapt backwards. He was glad he did, as those Quake Breakers would have ate into his Blazer Claws if given the time, and potentially, into his actual claws.

"What?" taunted King Sarasa. "You didn't want me to trim your nails? I was just trying to assist with your personal hygiene." He charged at his foe and swung one of his tools in the horizontal plane. Bowser brought one of his claws up from below for a devastating up slash that knocked King Sarasa's weapon clean from his hand and several yards away. King Sarasa spun backwards and moved to retrieve his tool with Bowser in pursuit. The Kruna of Fire exchanged clashes with the king before he was able to reach his implement, and metal collided with metal again.

Bowser seemingly possessed the advantage, having two claws to King Sarasa's lone Quake Breaker, but it was offset by the thickness and reach of the king's tool. Eventually, King Sarasa made a blunt, jarring strike that stunned Bowser long enough for him to go and retrieve his other chainsaw. As the battle went on, Bowser's subconscious started to attribute more importance to their conflict. The fight became more than just a grudge match. If Bowser managed to beat King Sarasa, the implications would be far reaching; and not just in potentially ending the king's tyrannical reign over the nation.

The pressure was starting to mount for both combatants. A defeat for the King of Sarasaland would mean embarrassment at the very best, possible dethronement, and, worst case scenario, death. If there was anything Bowser retained most from spectating Daisy's battles, it was her willingness and desire to embrace pressure and, even if the battle started off horrible, her ability to come through in the end with a clutch finish. Thinking about qualities like those that her father refused to acknowledge angered the Kruna of Fire even more and urged him on to put just a little more effort into every attack and counter. King Sarasa was still irritated from being called out as a bad parent, believing that it was no one else's place to criticize his methods and how he wanted to go about things. More

and more, he wanted to bring down this Kruna to his knees and make him plead for mercy and forgiveness. Either way the conflict turned out, both kings fought on as if it were the last battle they would ever know.

"So, sweetie," Marissa cooed. "Those were some impressive moves on those guards back there!"

"You saw?" asked Marut in disbelief.

"Of course!" answered Marissa. "I see everywhere. I'm here, then I'm there. I disappear, then I reappear; then I disappear, and I reappear; then I disappear, and I disappear; then I reappear, and I reappear; got it?"

Marut put a hand to his chin. "Uhhhhh..."

"Never mind that!" snapped the demon witch. "You've done a good job with taking out those T-29s back there, but I'm afraid that your livelihood is being put in jeopardy – and I'm not talking about me when I say that."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Marut.

"One simple question," replied Marissa. "How much faith do you really have in your friends, young one?"

"Well, all the faith I need, I guess," mumbled the Kruna of Air. "I never really thought about it..."

"They're dragging you to your grave and yet you're saying you trust and believe in them?"

"What do you mean? Why would they be doing that?"

Marissa made a series of playful giggles. "Let me show you. My Malocchio Eye can do wondrous things. I have spent many a century crafting, enchanting, and empowering my special eye. It transcends boundaries thought impossible by our ignorant world."

The demon witch opened her Malocchio Eye, filling it with energy and tapping into one of its abilities. All of a sudden, the ground underneath the two sank down several feet. Then, the whole environment around them that shifted down. They were both levitating as the world around them faded away, replaced by a picture of some large city. Now the two beings hovered in the air above the lively populace with a bird's eye view over the whole town.

"Observe," cooed Marissa. "Chai City, located just north of The Deep Wood. This is the capital of the Chai Kingdom."

"Wait, I don't understand," Marut murmured. "What does this have to do with anything? Why are you showing me this? What's going on?"

Suddenly, a huge fire ignited over the center of Chai City and rained down onto the streets. The flames were fast moving, engulfing several blocks of buildings and incinerating hundreds of people in record time. Screams pounded Marut's ears as people fled from the rapidly growing flames.

"This is what will happen tonight," explained the demon witch. "An entire city will be engulfed in flames. Thousands will die, countless more will be burnt beyond healing, and smoke shall suffocate the young, the elderly, and the frail."

Marut's stare was fixated on the ground below. Everyone was caught off guard and unprepared. He saw frantic bodies flailing around, doing their best to escape. He saw other bodies on the move, but covered in flames. The few fire wielders and water wielders that were in the city were doing the best they could to suppress the sheet of fire, but all they could do was slow it down. It was no ordinary fire. It was as if the fire was possessed.

"And wouldn't you know it!" said Marissa, a shine flickering through her Malocchio. In seconds, they were both phased down to the city streets far from the reaches of the flames but close enough to see that except for Daisy, the Kruna were all present, including Neva. The elemental wielders were doing their best to combat the fire, Bowser continually trying to dispel it and Warra making use of all the moisture in the area and squeezing every last bit of his energy and

even his life force out to create more water to use. Marut's soul sank when he saw the Kruna of Water collapse to the ground. It wasn't long before the blue-clothed fighter was engulfed by the fire.

"Futile attempts," the demon witch remarked. "If it was your average everyday fire, then you would have had a chance, but you see, this is *not* your average, everyday fire."

Bowser, fed up, releases a stream of fire from his mouth to try and nullify the ever strengthening wall of flames. The Koopa King's fire did not succeed in canceling out the inferno. To the shock of everyone else, Bowser's fire did not even get canceled out itself, nor did it add to the inferno they faced. The wall of flames *consumed* that of Bowser's. If there was ever an instance when a fire managed to incinerate another fire, that was it. Marut was turning pale watching the entire sight unfold.

"This inferno is not of this world," said Marissa. "These flames are eternally hungry. These flames are not mortal. The only way to contain them is to cast them into an abyss, a chasm, a bottomless pit, and even then, they still manage to burn back up to the surface..."

"But how?" Marut croaked. "How is this even possible?"

"These flames consume the target they are cast upon until no trace is left," replied Lord Arkana. "They come straight from a place called Limbo."

A chilling sensation overtook the Kruna of Air, causing tremors throughout his body. He was beyond spooked now. The fire even looked different from fires of their world. This fire looked like an enraged fiend. It looked alive. It looked starving. It looked famished.

"Your friends are going to lead you into this inferno, thinking they can stop it," Marissa replied, pointing her finger. "And eventually..."

Marut watched as the fire grew in strength and size to the point where his friends were all powerless to stop it. One by one, the inferno devoured them whole. Neva, Athelstan, Bowser, Ramona, Andrew, and Marut himself all succumbed to the flames. As Marissa

and the actual Marut viewed the gruesome scene, the flames from Limbo expanded over them, and soon, all they saw was angry, vengeful, hungry fire. Visible in the animated walls of the inferno were faint images of corpses, various fiends, and remorseful souls, and unless Marut and his teammates were able to do something about it, this vision of the future was going to become a reality.

"What do you do, Kruna?" cooed the demon witch. "You only have two options. You can go to Chai City to die a noble death, doing the best you can to delay the inevitable so that more people are able to escape, but then with you all dead, I am free to do as I please as there will be no one capable of challenging me. Daisy can't stop me by herself. Or, you can convince your friends not to go, and let a hole burn clean through the crust of the planet where Chai City-" She paused to clear her throat, a deceptively innocent look on her face. "...Used to be. Thousands more will have died in that scenario, but at least you will have saved yourselves..."

The flames surrounding them burned up and faded into the ether, revealing that Marissa and Marut were now back at their previous location in the Great Canyon. The haze and mist was all gone as well, but the atmosphere was unsettling and ominous regardless.

"The choice is yours, Kruna..." Marissa hauntingly murmured as her body faded away. "Either way...you lose... You all lose..."

Marut stood there by himself, eyes wide open and mad with shock. He had never feared for his life so much before. He wasn't aware of it, but he also had never been as pale as he was at that very moment.

Ramona and Andrew ran to Neva, having worked their way through the canyon labyrinth and arriving to the scene of Bowser and King Sarasa engaged in battle. The pair had done well, managing to destroy five T-29s. They did not look too fatigued at all from the experience either.

"We've got five," Ramona said to Neva. "How many-"

"Five," Neva answered, anticipating the question from the light wielder. She did not break her stare from the exchange occurring between Bowser and King Sarasa. Both kings had already demanded that no one intervene with their duel, and Neva had threatened any worker or guard that wanted to interfere with, "an icicle jammed high up the back door."

Bowser turned up the heat in more ways than one by surrounding his Blazer Claws in a coat of fire, adding more striking and blocking strength to the tools. He still had to be very careful, because at any given point, King Sarasa could activate the sawing function of his Quake Breakers again and cause some considerable damage. This could be during or in between strikes. Bowser did his best to stay light on his feet and swift with his moves. He was no Marut or Daisy or even Andrew in terms of speed, but he was quick for his size. If Marut was a ten and Daisy was a nine, then Bowser was a seven, and King Sarasa was not faster than him. The only reason the king continually checked Bowser's attacks was because of the better reach he had with his tools.

Dodging a thrust, Bowser leapt onto a nearby boulder, only to have King Sarasa's next slash cleave into the rock and cause it to collapse. The Kruna tumbled along the ground, but turned his momentum into a somersault that he used to twist into his Whirling Fortress technique and slam into the unsuspecting king. Bowser spun out of his attack and skidded to a halt as King Sarasa bounced to a near face planting stop.

Athelstan and Warra made their way over to Ramona, Andrew, and Neva. "Six T-29s sent to the scrap heap!" the Kruna of Stone reported. "Whoa, what's going on here?"

"Okay, sure," Warra muttered. "Just disregard everything about not engaging King Sarasa until every T-29 has been destroyed..."

"Well, they have been, haven't they?" asked Neva.

"We won't know for sure until Marut arrives," said Warra. "I'm surprised it's taken him this long. I thought he wanted to go alone so he could navigate the canyon quicker."

King Sarasa scowled as he pressed back to his feet. Bowser was back in defense, focused and intense, doing better against King Sarasa than he thought he would. For a moment, he wondered if he had overestimated the Sarasaland monarch and was instead rising up to an adversary that was not even present on the field.

"You're on the wrong end of this battle," the King of Sarasaland shouted in an attempt to nix any confidence that was building in the Kruna of Fire. Although Bowser didn't notice it, King Sarasa had been making ever so slight glances around the area in search of Vastus. He did not see the police commissioner anywhere. *Whenever you're ready, Vastus, I will be ready too,* he affirmed to himself. *They, however, will not.*

"You're wrong there, King," Bowser replied with a smile. "I know that I'm on the right side. For a while, I *was* on the wrong side, but that was the past. I know I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing!"

That's it, King Sarasa snarled in his thoughts. *Keep stalling. Just keep stalling.* He shifted back into a defensive stance. "I'm not making an attack, so if you want this battle to continue, you're going to have to go on the offense."

Having spent nearly three hours trying to purify the root and solar plexus chakras, Daisy was a short fuse ready to be lit and explode on the first thing identified as the agitator. Instead of focusing on her chakras, her attention drifted to the problem with Sarasaland. There was her father, who had a stranglehold on the nation and was essentially able to do whatever he pleased, and there was Marissa Arkana, an immensely formidable demon witch and spellcaster fiend who was only going to get more powerful. Marissa had King Boo, her Sweeps, and the hellhound horde on her side. King Sarasa had the entire population of Sarasaland on his side and an arsenal of nasty elemental earth weapons. And Daisy, well, it was just her, the Kruna, Neva, and maybe Geno. The cosmic being mentioned anything in regards to him having a direct impact on the efforts in Sarasaland, but even if he was, that meant there were still only nine of them. How could the nine of them stand up to the overwhelming number and power of two separate armies?

But what if? Daisy thought. *What if I'm doing it the wrong way? Maybe I should've taken Marissa's offer and partnered with her. At least, temporarily, that is. We could bring Sarasaland down in a hurry, I bet! Then at the last second, I'll catch her by surprise! It'll be the ultimate payback!*

Maybe it would just be easier and save a lot of trouble on everyone's part if I just went back to Castle Town and surrendered to my dad, she mused *. I could then take over Sarasaland like he wanted me to – if he still has that as an option on his agenda, that is – but then again, why would he want to employ a beast like me as the head of the nation? I should just go there and strip Sarasaland from him. A whole nation could defeat Marissa, couldn't it? And why stop there? After Marissa's defeated, I should just take control of other nations too. That way, I can combine and join nations together and bring an end to all deadly conflicts and wars. Why don't I just take all the nations in the world and force them all into peace? Is that so wrong?*

Daisy... a voice echoed in the Kruna of Earth's mind. *Honor and respect will take you far... Never give up either one... Trust your feelings...*

Terran? Daisy called out in her psyche.

"You've lost focus," Geno suddenly said, bringing Daisy back to their world. "You were doing so well until we circled back around to these remaining two chakras. Far too often already, you've been letting the enhanced anger of the Betedaimon flood your spirits to do the work for you that you yourself need to do without! Purify the chakras; don't wrestle with them! This will lead to disaster if you're not careful!"

"Alright! Alright! I get it! I get it!" Daisy screamed.

"Keep calm, Kruna," Geno warned. "The more impatient you are, the more mistakes you will make. You don't want to set yourself back too much, otherwise you risk trapping yourself within a self-fulfilling prophecy that will work against you."

In an unorthodox and unusual kind of reply, Daisy grunted, "You know what; I say we punt the root and solar plexus chakra and just

move forward with the other five."

"There is an ancient proverb," murmured Geno. "It reads something to the effect of, 'You can close your eyes to things you don't want to see, but you can't close your heart off to things you don't want to feel.' Are you preventing yourself from feeling something? Perhaps, from feeling...vulnerable?"

Daisy offered no response. Right after she had finished her statement, she sent her attention back inside of herself with even more intensive focus than before.

"So let's say we did move forward with only five of your chakras purified," Geno began, uncertain if Daisy was actually listening to him at this point. "Then what? If we progress forward through everything else we must accomplish, get you reverted back to normal, and then confront your father and the demon witch, what will be your response when you realize that it wasn't enough, and that your desire to abandon the root and solar plexus chakras was the difference between victory and a crippling defeat?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know, or you know that you're wrong, yet would rather face Marissa and King Sarasa instead of having to face yourself?"

Daisy, having already heard more than enough, released a blood-curdling growl, then proceeded to shoot up to her feet and storm off in the direction of the tunnel leading out of the sanctuary. Her tone was excessively dark and agitated as she replied behind her back, "None of your concern."

Geno took a deep breath and shook his head as Daisy left the area. "Find your way, Kruna," he murmured. "Find your way."

The standoff between the two kings persisted, the lull in action accompanied with an eerie ambience. True to his word, King Sarasa had no intention of attacking. He deferred that right to Bowser, but the Kruna of Fire now found himself hesitant. It was not without

reason, though. The Sarasaland monarch did not look like he expended much energy at all. That alone made Bowser grow very suspicious. If the king was up to something, his people did not know. They all were focused on their crowned leader's battle.

"Bowser's holding up very well here!" exclaimed Ramona. "What are the chances we get a victory now and King Sarasa's removed from office?"

"It's looking pretty good," said Neva. "Although I am surprised. I remember King Sarasa being a little more formidable than this."

Athelstan shrugged. "Could be age. No one lives forever." When Neva shot him a look, he added, "Well, no one who's not a three-eyed demon witch lives forever. Still, I was expecting a little more from King Sarasa. Or then again, maybe we're just that good now!"

"He's holding back," Warra said flatly. His remark drew a muffled gasp from Ramona and a disgruntled grumble from Andrew.

"That's crazy!" Neva snapped. "How can you tell? You just got here!"

"That's what I thought, but I wasn't sure," Andrew muttered. "He looked too relaxed in battle to be exerting himself the way we thought he was. That just goes to show what Warra's all about for noticing that the moment he came."

Neva crossed her arms. "Well isn't waterboy a cunning detective..."

"He's up to something," murmured Warra. "Bowser's fighting him, but I think we all should be on our guard."

"It's 'cause of the king's people, right?" asked Athelstan.

Warra shook his head. "They're not gonna do anything. There's something else..."

Bowser heard bits and pieces of the discussion behind him and decided not to wait any longer. He rushed toward King Sarasa, and metal clashed with metal once again. With every clang created, King Sarasa's blank stare grew into a grin.

You've all lost, the King of Sarasaland thought as he blocked and countered Bowser's claws. *Checkmate...*

Chapter XIX

Fracture :

The action between Bowser and King Sarasa continued underneath the sky's increasing cloud cover, although Bowser was getting uncomfortable with King Sarasa's all too relaxed demeanor. It looked like the ruler of Sarasaland barely broke a sweat, while Bowser himself was breathing at a quick pace. The Kruna was trying to keep up with the king, but then he started wondering if it was actually the king he was trying to keep up with or himself. As a test, Bowser started slowing down the frequency of his slashes. This was met in turn with a decrease of action from King Sarasa. Bowser then pulled back and took several skips backwards. King Sarasa did not pursue.

"Why is it that all of a sudden you're not fighting back?" Bowser asked. "You were not aggressive to begin with, but this; this is something I would expect from a novice."

King Sarasa gave a peculiar smile. "By all means, continue to attack me. I'm not stopping you. I'm content with defending against your assault. As a defensive specialist, it would only make sense for me to engage you head-on only as often as necessary. Battle Tactics 101. Maybe if you went to Sarasaland State University, you would have actually received a real education."

Bowser made a haughty laugh. "First off, I am a proud to say that my alma mater is the University of Moonview City, thank you very much! Second, you're over exaggerating the aspect of, 'defensive specialist,' I'm afraid."

"You shouldn't be proud to be from UMC," King Sarasa grumbled. "Then again, you probably couldn't handle 2SU. If it hasn't become obvious by now, I'm holding my defenses up to wear you down so I can strike when you're fatigued."

That's a lie! Warra screamed in thought. "Don't believe him, Bowser! Something's amiss here!"

"What's amiss?" King Sarasa questioned. "Obviously, if you can't tell what's amiss, then there's nothing for you to try and point out as a deception! It's not that complex!" He turned his attention back to Bowser. "So are you going to continue or are you content with the standoff?"

Bowser dashed towards King Sarasa and ripped up an underhand with his Blazer Claws from underneath. King Sarasa came down with his Quake Breakers to block, and just like that, the two combatants were at it again.

"2SU students have to learn how to learn!" yelled Bowser with a followup swipe. Again, King Sarasa blocked, but he did not provide a counter. It was after blocking another swipe that he decided to show some retaliation.

"UMC makes their degrees on toilet paper!" snapped King Sarasa, smirking as he thrust with one of his chainsaw tools. The Kruna of Fire leapt away to keep from getting stabbed, but that didn't deter him from engaging the king again.

"2SU gave you a one question exam!" Bowser remarked, flaring and charging flames around his tools. "They told you all, 'Use 'before' in a sentence,' and one of your boneheaded classmates put down, 'Two and two *be four* .' They gave him the degree and told him to get the hell out!" With a wicked, bulbous fireball ready, he whipped it at King Sarasa.

The King of Sarasaland crossed his tools and slashed outwards to deflect the flaming spheroid up into the air. "At least I didn't go to a school that thought 'Ryan Fitzpatrick, Patrick Fitzryan' was a worthwhile lesson!"

"I can count on one hand the number in your graduating class!" Bowser hollered as he hurled another fireball. King Sarasa crossed his tools again and repeated the double slash, only this time angling it down. A veritable chunk of the stony ground by the Sarasaland monarch's feet was blown apart, making a charred pit in the rock.

"I understand if you're bitter about failing Lunch," King Sarasa said. "Sitting on your hindquarters and chowing down is never easy."

"At least they were generous enough to teach you guys how to flush the toilet," Bowser quipped. "They couldn't teach ya how to wipe yourself off when you're finished, but at least you know how to push down the handle."

"Okay, when did this turn into an alumni feud?" asked Andrew.

"Why are you complaining?" asked Neva. "We know none of what they're saying is true, but hearing them go at it like this is pretty damn funny!"

"Please tell me why there's a campus-wide 'Nap Time' in UMC," said King Sarasa.

Bowser snarled and grinned as he charged at King Sarasa again, but he stopped well before he got close. A loud crunching, crackling sound echoed in the distance south of their current location. It was intermittent in its frequency, increasing in volume ever so slightly to the point where soon, everyone's attention in the northern sector was drawn southward.

King Sarasa narrowed his eyes, showing off an arrogant smile. "Well, this is an interesting development."

An incensed Warra pointed his arm in King Sarasa's direction. "What did you do?!"

Crumbling.

All that assaulted Marut's ears as he cruised up his passage of the gorge maze was crumbling. He stopped to look around once he noticed that the crumbling was not only refusing to stop but increasing in intensity as well. The powerful sounds reverberated against the hard stone walls of the canyon, though the source could not be pinpointed. Still freaked about his encounter with Marissa, the noise was more vibrant and vivid in Marut's ears under the influence of his sympathetic nervous system.

And now there was hammering.

A thud entered the chain of noise every handful of seconds. If Marut didn't know any better, he would've thought that something was trying to eat the chunks of rock in the canyon. Not that that was out of the question, of course. There were species in the world known to ingest and breakdown rocks, but they would not have been able to produce anywhere near the same amount of volume that was now coursing all throughout the canyon. Marut kicked into high gear and sped up the gorge. Something was terribly wrong, and the Kruna of Air feared that there was no time to stop it.

Along came the sound of snapping. That snapping went off in tandem with a ripping, grating kind of noise that pierced through all the ears in the northern sector of the Great Canyon. King Sarasa's workers and guards started to worry with fear and uncertainty.

"I'm not going to ask you again!" Warra demanded. "What did you do?"

King Sarasa kept his smirk as he replied, "I did what I needed to do. I did what was necessary."

"What does that mean?" Bowser asked.

At the conclusion of the Kruna of Fire's statement, the ground began to tremor and rumble. It started off as a soft shaking, but was progressing in strength with each passing moment. By now, all of King Sarasa's people were panicking.

"This is an emergency measure," explained King Sarasa. "Designed to keep fools like you down. This special order was made on the off chance that rebels like you somehow found my secret armory."

"And what constitutes this emergency measure of yours?" asked Andrew.

"I'll say this," King Sarasa replied with a chuckle. "It's a shame you didn't get that last T-29."

"We missed one?!" Ramona exclaimed. "How? They were all out in the open!"

"Not all of them," said the Sarasaland monarch. "One T-29 was always kept in a hidden cave for scenarios such as this."

"YOU EARTH WIELDERS AND YOUR DAMN CAVES!" Neva cried out in a fit.

The ground started to jerk as the noises of impending doom continued to escalate. The panicking among the crowd progressed to widespread screaming and chaos. The guards tried to quiet down the workers but were unsuccessful.

"This armory is secret no more, so it is of no use to me any longer," bellowed the King of Sarasaland. "You see, I am well prepared, and I don't need evidence of my dealings – this canyon is about to go down in a crushing cataclysm."

All attention was drawn to the sky above. A helicopter zoomed into view overhead, at which point Vastus appeared from the passenger side to drop a ladder down. King Sarasa jumped and caught the ladder, then climbed up a little and anchored himself to its ropes.

"I suggest you all at least *try* to escape," remarked the King of Sarasaland. The helicopter began flying off, leaving Neva and the Kruna – and all of King Sarasa's workers and guards to their own respective horrors – behind to face their imminent end.

The tremors throughout the area became stronger, and the rattling of the ground started to vibrate through the skeletons of everyone. If it had not become obvious to King Sarasa's people before what kind of a person he truly was, it was evident to all now. Only at this point did the Sarasaland monarch's agenda begin getting called into serious question.

The reactions of the people from their king's betrayal were mixed. Some of the workers cursed their ruler, calling him out after all everyone had done for him. A few scattered portions of people got down and knelt in prayer. Others were apathetic and unusually calm, as if they didn't have anything worthwhile waiting for them at home anyways. A group chased the helicopter, hoping their leader would grab out for at least one of them and pull them onto the ladder of salvation, but it was not so. The king signaled up towards the

helicopter to retract some of the ladder slack to pull him aboard.

Marut came dashing into the area in time to see the helicopter flying away and locked onto it in his periphery as he made a quick scan of the sector. The canyon continued up in the same direction the helicopter was heading in. "Everyone! Follow that helicopter!" the air wielder screamed. "Hurry! That's our only way out!"

An earthquake was now developing. If Daisy was here, she could have at least tried to mitigate it in some way. None of the workers or guards were earth wielders, or elemental wielders of any kind for that matter. They had no choice but to run, and their beacon was soaring away. Neva and the Kruna directed everyone up into the pathway of the canyon. Unknown to them, this passage was one of King Sarasa's emergency exit routes. Bowser, Athelstan, and Andrew combined their might to ram through the bolted barrier of gates, opening up their route out of the canyon and into the plains. The earthquake kicked up in intensity and jolted the Great Canyon just as everyone made their way out to the open fields. Pieces of the gorge floor ripped apart and staggered in all directions, coinciding with a massive, soul-sinking implosion that drew the canyon inwards on itself. Once at a safe distance away, all bodies turned around and all eyes looked at the colossal spectacle happening before them.

"This is not your ordinary earthquake," said Athelstan. "You don't have to be an earth wielder to tell!"

"Because that final T-29 was hidden in a cave," added Warra. "That most likely implies a subterranean environment. That means-"

"The T-29 was generating the earthquake in two directions," finished Bowser. "The machine reached up to the surface and down through the crust. The question is, what does that mean for the Great Canyon?"

The answer to Bowser's question came when the earthquake further strengthened in scope and magnitude. For a moment, the workers were worried that aftershocks could radiate outwards and affect the entire environment around them. The anxiety faded once they saw the buckling canyon begin to descend.

"I don't believe it," murmured Andrew. "The whole canyon... It... It's actually sinking into the ground..."

The entirety of the developing ruins of the Great Canyon fell into the ground, kicking up tons of dust, dirt, soil, haze, shredded rock, and wind. The misshapen, apocalyptic mess of destroyed stone, bunkers, and camps continued sinking past ground level, but it didn't stop there. Everything that the former Great Canyon was blasting outwards then blasted in a nearly vertical scope as the landmark began its long and slow descent down through – and into – the surface of the Earth.

By the time the cataclysmic event passed, the Great Canyon was gone. Everything that once composed it had not only been flattened but had also been cast off into the deep, dark, elliptical chasm that spanned the length of the former canyon. It was as if someone took a serrated knife and split into the taut skin of the planet's crust to make a nasty laceration. There were platforms scattered throughout the pit, but the drop looked indefinite.

The fates of those who had been left collapsed and unconscious in the deeper regions of the Great Canyon were all sealed. A moment of silence was given to those few hundred workers who followed the canyon into the void. Not a thing could have been done to save them.

With the seventy or so remaining workers and guards questioning King Sarasa's leadership and priorities, Neva took the opportunity to explain everything that the king was up to and all that she and Daisy had experienced in the past few days. Virtually all the times she tried to talk to the people of Sarasaland about such matters before met with bitter failure, but now, the people were not only listening to the ice wielder, but they were believing her as well.

"Go back to your homes!" Neva ordered. "Whether that be in Chai, Easton, Birabuto, Muda, Castle Town, or a recently conquered province, go back to your homes and spread the word! King Sarasa is corrupt and is draining the life out Sarasaland! He's been stealing the wealth and livelihood of the nation for years!"

"The lives lost here today will not have been lost in vain!" howled Bowser. "Fight back for what is yours!"

An uproar of fury erupted as the people cheered and thanked Neva and the Kruna for both their actions in the Great Canyon and for their willingness to resist King Sarasa. It was the first time Neva ever heard any of the king's people so openly ready to challenge his authority. They were all fired up as they scattered into the directions of their individual homes.

"Thing's are gonna change around here," murmured Neva, sighing. "Finally..."

Bowser put a hand on Neva's shoulder. "Not yet. We can't be sure. There were less than a hundred people here and thousands upon thousands of others spread throughout the nation. What we can say is that this is a step in the right direction."

Marut wanted to speak up and tell the others about his encounter with the demon witch, but he found himself too scared and frightened to do so. He was too focused on what Marissa had said and was unable to find the words to describe the vision she shared. It could have been that he was still wired up and anxious over it. The sun was blocked by the cloud cover, but it was bright enough to tell that there was still a few hours left of daylight. *Surely I can bring it up before sundown,* he thought.

"What a mess," muttered Andrew, gazing at the vast gash in the planet's surface. "Stuff like this makes me not want to fight anymore."

"But we have to fight," Warra said. "For some people, talking is not enough. There are those who words alone will not reach, and it is those beings that we must stand against."

Andrew nodded. "Actions speak louder than words. In this world, that rings all too true..."

"Hopefully, we're moving closer to a new, more peaceful era," murmured Ramona. "I can't keep seeing stuff like this happening. It's too much."

"Let's get back to Geno's Sanctuary and see if Daisy's finished with her chakras," said Warra.

"That means we'd have to trek all the way back down along this massive abyss," stated Bowser.

"Why don't we take a shortcut?" suggested Andrew, exchanging a look with Ramona.

From the overhead portal that formed in front of the tunnel to Geno's Sanctuary, Neva and the Kruna dropped to the ground. Ramona and Andrew disbanded their portal once everyone passed through. They all expected to see Daisy somewhere in the sanctuary once they got to the other side of the tunnel, but all they saw was Geno. They all looked around under the assumption that the misty atmosphere could be blurring their vision, but they did not see their earth wielder.

Neva shrugged. "Maybe she went underground."

"Neva, this is serious!" scolded Warra.

"I am being serious!" Neva assured. "I knew some earth wielders who never liked coming to the surface, some stone wielders who always stayed in the mountains, some air wielders always in forests and jungles and living high up in the trees – I'm being as serious as can be!"

"What happened?" Bowser called out to Geno. "Where's Daisy?"

"Daisy's gone," Geno said. "She ran off in a fit of anger. I don't know where she went."

Chapter XX

The Return :

The helicopter continued on its way to Castle Town, nearing the city walls. King Sarasa was still very bitter and angry over the loss of his armory where the Great Canyon formerly stood and even more maddened by the loss of all his T-29s, but he had to do what he did. Keeping his image clean and making sure that the public didn't catch on to his ulterior motives was more important than keeping his ultimate weapons in his military's rotation. *More T-29s can be built,* he thought. *Better weapons can be made. Once your image is ruined though, there's no fixing that...*

The construction of more weapons would take time; this, King Sarasa acknowledged and understood. And yet, even so, there was something else he was more interested in at the moment. The king had his attention primarily diverted to this special construct despite the disaster in the Great Canyon.

In the northern sector of Castle Town a little ways behind the Central Castle, rows and rows of tall buildings and skyscrapers stood, some taller than even the Central Castle itself. One of these buildings in particular, the highest one in the city, was a clock tower. Its clock was massive and electronically operated, courtesy of Sarasaland's best technicians and architects. Its position seemed to loom over the entirety of Castle Town, and it was here that another of King Sarasa's grand schemes was in motion. The king made sure that all the schemes he had were coordinated to work in harmony with one another; work in harmony, but not be dependent. In this way, if one failed – like the Great Canyon Armory – it would only be a single loss.

He referred to the clock tower as the Sarasaland Campanile, and what he had in store for it – although not the most functional – would be not only impressive, but legendary. A construct of its magnitude would go down in history and work in cementing his legacy. Under no other ruler would such a creation have been made.

"Take me back to Central Castle," King Sarasa said to the pilot. "I want to see the final product of our special project before its grand opening."

Some distance into the tree-laden paths of Sarasa Field, Daisy wandered, aimless and frustrated. She was racking her brain trying to devise a way to beat King Sarasa and Lord Arkana, but all she managed to do was torment herself even more. The fact that she was tired in more ways than one only served to further infuriate her. With everything that had happened since her return to Sarasaland, she was utterly confused.

And then she started comparing herself to Mario and Luigi. The renowned, widely revered fire wielder and air wielder were seasoned vets with several accomplishments under their belt. Daisy was just a rookie, a novice. Even though she was talented and powerful, she had very little experience. If Mario was here in this situation, he would not have been nearly as impulsive and impatient as she had been. He would not have let himself stumble into a trap. He would not have let himself get captured and mutated. He would have been able to do something to prevent Neva's resistance team from getting flattened. His brother's results would've been similar.

If they're that good, then what does that make me? she wondered. *I've put my duty and destiny above anything else; I've put the safety of others over my own personal health. But now, it's just... not working out. My whole mission here has been marred by mistakes, and now I've dragged my team into this. Why should anyone be surprised that we – that* I *– jacked up this mission beyond repair?*

The Kruna of Earth stopped to peer around at the landscape. She looked into the sky, a sky that was as clouded as her mind. It did her no good to look at the overhead haze. She went to the side of the road and knelt down to gaze upon a group of gladiolus flowers caught in her periphery. Although she was able to appreciate the delicate plants, she did not seem as enthusiastic and ecstatic to see them as she usually did.

If we fail, if either my father or the demon witch somehow manage to

win, then it won't be a shock, Daisy thought. *I'll have no one to blame but myself.*

An unknown male voice began echoing through her mind. *You are a Kruna – an elemental guardian. You were not chosen because of experience or accomplishments or even power. Destiny has chosen you because you were meant to undertake this journey.*

Daisy stood up, looking around in an attempt to pinpoint the source of the voice to make sure she was not hearing things. No one else was around. A slight breeze picked up, not significant but enough of a disturbance for Daisy to notice.

Worry not about your pitfalls or what you don't have, the voice continued. *Worry not about your flaws or mistakes. A true Kruna possesses the heart to make it all irrelevant, and the guts to fight to the very end.*

" Yeah, okay," Daisy muttered. "I'm sure destiny had it in store for me to take on this tainted form. I'm definitely the poster girl of the gold standard for Kruna."

Trust yourself, and trust your fellow Kruna, the voice urged. *You will not be able to succeed without them...*

"And who are you to tell me that?" the earth wielder asked.

Wisdom from ages passed... the voice replied, its statement reverberating as it trailed off.

The breeze then stopped, and the air regained its relative stagnancy. Whatever presence Daisy felt was gone. She looked around again and still saw no one. "I hope destiny's not playing a sick joke," she muttered to herself.

Suddenly, Daisy heard scuffling and rattling through the bushes. A small group of Monty Moles emerged, fleeing from a pack of ravenous hellhounds. Without thinking, Daisy charged forward, slashing, punching, kicking at the hellhounds and knocking them to the side. Angered but weakened, the hellhound pack growled and stumbled off into the trees. Daisy turned to see the Monty Moles

trotting across the path to the underbrush on the other side. She wasn't sure why she was so compelled to follow them, but she felt the need to see what they were up to and took off after them.

A little bit of hustle and hurried movements got her caught up with the Monty Moles, though she was concerned that she might scare or anger them. The Monties, however, were not worried despite having acknowledged that a strange creature was following them. They picked up the pace as they continued deeper into the shrubbery and trees, forcing Daisy to get down on all fours like them to keep up. A couple more Monty Moles joined the group from the sides and followed the ones in front alongside the Kruna of Earth.

Soon, they reached a large cave that sloped down underground. The group of Monties stopped at the entrance and looked around, not seeming to mind that Daisy was with them. They then got up on their stubby legs and waddled their way into the darkness. Daisy entered with them.

It was only a short distance into the cave before things turned pitch-black. Daisy looked around as they went deeper in and expected the Monty Moles to be colliding into the walls, if not each other. But the Monties kept in line and did not break their pace. If anything, they were moving around *better* than they were on the surface. *How are these guys even able to see in here?* Daisy wondered. *I have my night vision working for me, but these guys have poor eyesight regardless of whether they're above surface or below ground! I don't get it... Or are they even 'seeing' at all?*

Daisy stopped when she saw that they came to a dead end. The Monty Moles stopped as well, knowing to by however it was that they were able to tell what their surroundings were. Daisy lumbered to one of the walls, noticing that there was something different about their texture as opposed to the rest of the cave. It looked like the wall was loose, as if it had been recently burrowed. Or maybe it was always kept loose like that? The Monty Moles hopped up and used their claws to dig and burrow into the walls. They were heading somewhere, that was certain. *I came this far,* Daisy thought. *I might as well see where all this is going to lead.*

She focused her elemental powers into the wall to spread the earth

apart into a tunnel in which she could crawl through. As the Monty Moles ahead continued to dig, she kept her focus on the dirt and clay all around so that the moles left a tunnel behind them for her to follow behind. Out of respect for their natural environment, she made sure that the tunnels closed behind her to return to their previous state.

The Monty Moles kept digging in harmonious fashion, arms swiveling and claws sifting and shoveling the soil and minerals out of their way. As they continued plowing ahead, they didn't appear to be fighting the earth around them or resisting it in any way. They were moving *with* the earth. Their movements were fluid, controlled, purposeful, coming off as more like an art form than of an action or chore. As Daisy followed them, she noticed that none of their movements were harsh or forced in any way. There was no need to force anything. They were just digging.

The Monty Moles broke through to open space on the other side and dropped down onto a slope of moderate height. Even their sliding was simple and relaxed. When Daisy dropped down onto the slope, she slid down on her two feet, tight and tensed as if she were trying to assert to the slope that she was going to slide down the way she wanted to. When they all reached a flat surface, the Monties shook themselves off to get rid of the dirt accumulated on their fur while Daisy stomped her foot down to jolt off whatever earthy matter was stuck to her body and hair.

Where they ended up was a place Daisy did not at all expect to see. They had arrived within a small community of Monty Moles complete with various buildings and illuminated not only by the lightstones lining the walkways but huge, glowing teal crystals and scattered bioluminescent mushrooms on long, tall stalks. Daisy continued on with her group of Monties when she saw them walking down one of the paths leading into the center of the society.

Throughout the community, the Kruna of Earth saw Monties at work. Some of the moles were building more structures while others were bringing back mined materials from other areas underground. *This is a peaceful, unified place,* Daisy thought. *Not like it is on the surface. These guys are smarter than a lot of people give them credit for.*

Cutting through the other side of the community, Daisy and the Monty Moles came up to a wall that angled into a vertical tunnel ascending notably high. The Monties got on the wall and started climbing their way up. Daisy ascended by way of wall jumping, though she made use of her Crystal Grip in between jumps to cling to the walls and ensure she did not outpace the climbing Monties.

It had been a little while since Daisy saw sunlight, but that's what she caught sight of at the other end of the cave once they reached the top of the vertical tunnel. The Monty Moles continued towards the light, and Daisy followed once more. After being in darkness for so long, the outside light was blinding. Daisy had to shield her face and squint to give her eyes time to adjust, though the Monty Moles were not going to stop and wait for her.

Through the greenery they all trekked once more until they reached one of the paths of Sarasa Field. The Monty Moles stopped for a brief moment, then scattered and went off in random directions. It seemed that was the end of Daisy's little underground adventure. The Kruna of Earth looked around to try and figure out where she was in relation to where she had been before traveling with the Monty Moles and came to the conclusion that she had not diverged too far from her previous location.

I'll have to go back to Geno's Sanctuary at some point, she thought, now calm but somewhat forlorn. *I've probably done nothing but set myself back with all this time I've wasted...* She looked around for the silhouette of the mountains of the Muda Kingdom off in the distance, then lumbered in their direction.

"Oh look, the Sarasa girl is all by herself, out in the open," Marissa cooed, floating over her graveyard. She had been surveying and scanning through Sarasa Field with her Malocchio Eye by way of Remote Viewing when she had spotted Daisy. The demon witch locked onto the Kruna of Earth to track her movements. Three of her Sweeps, Naraka, Tamara, and Solovar, were nearby on the ground, now awaiting her commands.

"What an interesting development!" Marissa sang with cheer. "A

beast, a beast; Lurking in the night; let us bring her a harrowing fright... let us bring her harrowing fright!"

"I like the way that sounds," commented Naraka. "A beautiful voice, my lord."

"But it's not nighttime!" exclaimed Tamara. "And Christmas isn't for a month and a half!"

"Well it wasn't gonna work any other way!" snapped Marissa. "Why can't you just be grateful like Naraka? I'm blessing you with my heavenly voice and my not-so-heavenly beauty."

"My mother was right," Tamara mumbled. "Hell is real."

"Solovar," said Marissa, her tone now serious. "You and King Boo are going to Chai City this evening, correct?"

Solovar nodded. "And we will be ready. Although I have to say, Gortox's expertise with this type of objective would've been of great service to the event had you not penalized him so harshly for his... incompetence, if that's the right word."

"I was hoping those Kruna would have been able to do away with King Sarasa," said Marissa. "But sadly, that's not the case." She ignored the statement about the deceased Black Mage.

"At least they destroyed the T-29s," noted Naraka. "The king's army is crippled without those."

"Something tells me that there won't be much of an 'army' left for him by the time all is said and done," stated Marissa. "But we'll see how things play out. Right now, I wanna observe what the Sarasa girl is up to... Wait a minute... What's this?!"

"What is it, Lord Arkana?" Solovar asked.

"Someone new..." the demon witch responded. "Someone different... he's coming from behind Daisy and closing in on her *fast* ..."

Daisy sensed the incoming energy source in time to spot and leap out of the octagram of light that formed underneath her before the symbol released a fierce column of blazing radiance up into the air. She got a look at her aggressor and gasped in disbelief. There, standing in the center of the path was Kokoro in all of his frightening, nightmarish might. Daisy could not tell if the Soul Stealer was smiling with rage or quivering with excitement, or both. There was something about him though that seemed very different from their previous encounter, and that was taking into account neither the backpack he had with him nor the braces and supports spanning the lower portion of his right arm.

"It's dishonorable to not represent your elemental affinity, you know," said Daisy, referring to his incoherent clothing color scheme.

Kokoro spat on the ground. "I don't like white. I don't like gold. I don't like honor. I don't like you."

"I figured as much," growled Daisy. "And just what do you think you're doing sneaking around here, Kokoro?"

"I was going to ask you the same exact question," the archfiend snarled. "I was also going to ask about your makeover – You should make up your mind! First you're springing out spiky hair and getting contacts and spray tans, and now you're not even human! Are you going through phases?"

"I don't have the patience, you coward."

"Coward. Ouch. That hurts..."

"Just tell me why you're here!"

"Remember this?" Kokoro asked, raising his heavily braced right arm. "It is not functioning properly. It never will. And it's your fault."

Daisy smirked. "Well, if you'd like me to do the same with the other arm, I'd be happy to even you out."

"And there it is!" exclaimed Kokoro. "You were just itching to say that weren't you? Let me tell you something; don't confuse words and actions. I don't care what kind of form you're in now; you are way out

of your league."

Daisy paid no attention to Kokoro's statement. Her focus was drawn to the Soul Stealer's neck where she caught sight of the Master Pendant. The last time anyone had seen the gem, it was hurling away from Elkon's Final Fortress through the realm of the Twelfth Dimension. Not a single soul that knew of its existence was expecting it to make a comeback. Intensely grim, she mumbled, "You've got to be kidding me..."

Kokoro clenched his good fist in mounting rage. "How do you think I felt when not only was my arm destroyed, but I returned to the Ice Shrine to find the scattered ashes of my Scroll of Souls?"

"How about the same way I felt when I found out you killed my former master-"

"SHUT UP!" Kokoro yelled. "THIS IS NOT ABOUT YOU! JUST SHUT UP FOR ONCE!" The Soul Stealer's voice echoed throughout the environment. "EVERYTIME I HEAR YOUR VOICE, I WANT TO RIP THROUGH THE CORE OF THIS PLANET!"

Whatever wildlife was still nearby was fleeing fast from Kokoro. Daisy was not fazed, but she did not say anything in response. Something in the atmosphere felt very wrong to her. The Soul Stealer took off his backpack and dropped it onto the ground.

"All those souls I collected," muttered the trembling archfiend. "All that time... all that effort... I was going to use those souls..."

"For what?" Daisy growled. "Your trophy room? Your demented collection?"

"... I was going to use those souls to unlock the secret to immortality..." he responded. "You fool..."

Daisy slammed her fists onto the ground. "Damn it! What is with you all and immortality?! You and my father both are hellbent on living forever! One immortal being is enough to have to deal with; I don't intend on having to face three!"

"Don't you worry about it," Kokoro hissed. "Because your mortality is

about to shine through." His eyes flashed a quick, piercing glow. "I'll make sure of it. You will pay. Those souls were going to be my currency!"

"Currency for who?" snapped the Kruna of Earth.

"The most powerful demon who ever existed!" hollered Kokoro.

" *I'm* the most powerful demon who ever existed!" Marissa yelled.

Naraka was doing everything he could to make sure he was looking in every other direction but at Marissa. Tamara coughed a couple times and then started loudly clearing his throat. Solovar had to stifle a chuckle.

"Hey! Those two don't count!" the witch barked at Tamara. "If they're so powerful, then why are the both of them sealed away at this very moment?" When no response was given by either Tamara, Naraka, or Solovar, she grinned and shouted, "Exactly! Now shut up!" She redirected her attention back towards her Malocchio Eye. "Besides, I doubt very much either one of them would want souls. Whoever this Kokoro guy here is sounds like he was being used as a pawn... and it looks like he's being used as a pawn again now if that thing around his neck is what I think it is..."

"All... that you've done to me..." Kokoro grumbled. "I will pay it back a hundred – no, a *thousand* times over!"

Daisy got herself ready to fight, shifting into stance and preparing her energy. "I've beaten you before, I can beat you again."

At this point, Kokoro's trembling was easily discernible even at the distance that Daisy was at. He was a ticking time bomb of fury, and he looked ready to go off.

"You..." the Soul Stealer groused. "I should've destroyed you the moment I laid my eyes on you! I should've destroyed you when you were just some perky little kid! That was a mistake on my part, a

mistake of pride." Now Kokoro's breathing became obscenely heavy. Spasms started shooting through his left hand. "You crushed my arm... You destroyed my Scroll of Souls... You humiliated me with defeat on the battlefield... And now, you have the nerve to think that you're just going to beat me again? No, no, no, no, no... I don't think so. I will not let that happen." He clutched the region in his right arm just above the elbow with his left hand. He grimaced and growled as his grip on his arm became tighter. Daisy scowled in turn, unsure of what he was going to do next but expecting whatever it would be to be particularly heinous. Even so, no one could have been prepared for what was to come.

A blood-curdling scream filled the air, causing birds to scatter and fly away in fear. Daisy's intense stare became wide-eyed as Kokoro's right arm from the top of the elbow down rolled halfway between the two beings. Anguished screaming and grunting continued as he stomped on his backpack and used his one good arm to rip it apart. Within the backpack was a silvery cybernetic prosthetic in the shape of a right arm, and it was this that he took and jammed into his open flesh.

Kokoro then added maniacal laughing to his disturbing utterance of sounds. In between cackles, he projected to the heavens, "LEMON JUICE! SALT! VINEGAR! ALCOHOL!"

In some grisly, gruesome manner, Kokoro's new arm latched on and secured in place. The archfiend did not even wait for the pain to subside or for the bleeding to cease before he tested out the arm's functioning. As the moments passed, the prosthetic began responding more and more like his left arm. He even managed to materialize and disperse an orb of light in the palm of his new hand. Satisfied, he locked his veiny, strained eyes on Daisy and stared her down as if doing so would launch her ten octillion miles through space.

"Are you still so willing to fight me?" taunted the Soul Stealer. "Are you still so confident that you're going to get off scot-free for your crimes against me?"

"Crimes against you?!" Daisy snarled. "So all of a sudden, your countless murders and homicides don't mean anything? That's not

how it works!"

"Don't dare think that you can tell me anything about anything, earth wielder," Kokoro moaned. His tone was so quiet that it was more disturbing than it would've been had he yelled the way he did moments ago. "You are nothing. You will perish. I will do to your head what I did to my arm." He then began grunting and chuckling in malevolent, barely contained anger. "Oh yes... I'll make sure... that you're in no shape... to get in my way *ever* again..."

Chapter XXI

Perfect Hatred :

Wasting no more time, Kokoro dished out the first move, sending a concentrated laser searing through the air. Noting that the trajectory of the light would have led into one of her knees, Daisy cut to the side in time to evade. A burning, zapping sound provoked her to turn around. In the ground some distance away was a scorched hole. Kokoro's chuckling drew her attention back to him.

"Good job," said Kokoro. "You just narrowly avoided a third-degree burn."

What? In that little thing? the Kruna of Earth thought, looking back at the hole again.

"There's a saying," Kokoro murmured with malice. "It's something to the effect of, 'If you play with fire, you'll get burned.' Whoever said that needs to get out more. Fire's got nothing on light."

Daisy looked back at Kokoro, specifically at the Master Pendant adorned around his neck. The Soul Stealer looked to be in control of the gem. *Although Grekka was in control of it too until midway through the battle* , she thought.

"I'll admit, that was a large portion of power siphoned into that little laser," said Kokoro. "But I don't need to use *that* much to beat you."

"Oh yeah?" Daisy snarled. "C'mon then! Either put up or shut up!"

"Just as mouthy as before I see," Kokoro replied, raising his prosthetic arm. An orb of light began to form around his mechanized hand, growing in glow and brightness. Daisy readied herself to dodge with the expectation of a burst of power much larger than his previous attack. Midway through the gathering of energy however, Kokoro's light became jagged and irregular. This strange development persisted until he was ready to fire the blast of light, and when he did, it did not flow straight towards Daisy. It instead

zigzagged around in the air and shot off to the side of the earth wielder. Kokoro narrowed his eyes into a scowl, though Daisy was just as surprised about the power behind the blast as she was the trajectory it flew.

Kokoro tried the same attack again, once more with his new arm, and again the blast burst through the air with haphazard movement. Daisy stood her ground and did not budge. The light fired at her zipped around as if being reflected by invisible mirrors and missed her entirely. Flustered, Kokoro released several more of the bursts in randomized directions, figuring that one of them had to angle into the Kruna of Earth. The blasts were quick moving and required instant reaction in order for Daisy to dodge. She was not conscious of it, but it seemed that some sort of primal instinct took over and enhanced her reflexes and reaction time to evade what neither Kokoro nor Daisy could predict beforehand. After several batches of light bursts, all dodged by Daisy, Kokoro ceased his offensive and began staring at his prosthetic.

Those were some very odd attacks of his, Daisy said in her mind. *It's obvious though that the erratic movements of those lights were not on purpose.*

Kokoro kept looking over his right arm, the pain he felt in it all too prominent. He had yet to adjust to the new limb, let alone give his body time to adjust to the shock of losing an arm and having it immediately replaced with another. But he figured the timing of the attachment of the metal arm would help in maintaining more neurological control than he actually had.

"There's a method to my madness," Kokoro called out. And yet, he could have easily used his left arm and accrued better results.

Suddenly, the Master Pendant around the Soul Stealer's neck began to glow. Daisy recognized the sight all too well, images of the same glow from that pendant when it latched on to Grekka flooding her mind. To her surprise though, nothing happened; at least, nothing that she saw.

Daisy would have wished she paid more attention to what happened next after the fact. Kokoro operated his right arm to make one more

burst of light, this time with the precision and fluidity that would have made one believe that his metal limb was actually a natural part of him. The light shot through the air straight and true, catching Daisy off-guard and forcing her to make a quick move. She caught a glancing blow to her shoulder from the burst and was knocked back with blunt, hard-hitting force rather than scorching intensity. Still, her shoulder did not take the concentrated light very well and showed mild burn damage.

"Your transformation did you a disservice, Sarasa," Kokoro taunted. "It's always easier to hit a bigger, wider target."

"Oh sure – never mind all those blasts you fired that missed!" Daisy snapped.

Kokoro didn't say anything in response. He simply narrowed his eyes and smirked. It was only an unusual expression from him because of the strange eeriness that accompanied it.

His power has increased since the last time we've met, Daisy thought. *I don't know how much of an impact the Master Pendant by itself has had on him, but he has definitely ascended to a new level, and I have stayed the same – if not, actually regressed. This is not looking good; I just barely made it out of our last clash.*

Kokoro fiddled with his right arm, more than satisfied with the sudden control gained over his new limb. He glanced over at Daisy as he did so, wide-eyed and smiling, faint laughter escaping from his closed-mouth. He would be ready to hand out another attack in a matter of seconds, and Daisy, for all her offensive tendencies, was sitting there waiting on him. She had not seen an opening she could capitalize on, but then she thought back to her trip with the Monty Moles.

Out came a potent beam of light from Kokoro's hand. In an act of evasion, Daisy concentrated her elemental energies as she tore into the ground and burrowed underneath with her semi-clawed hands. Kokoro watched as his burst flew off into the distance, becoming very disgruntled with the Kruna of Earth's disappearance into the ground below. An uneasy silence followed, Kokoro standing firm but with no knowledge or hint as to where Daisy could be. For all he

knew, she could have escaped underground. *But she's not the kind of person who would do something like that,* he thought. *She's too foolishly bold and brash to consider self-preservation.*

Several moments more followed of tense quiet. Everything was so still and calm that Kokoro started to wonder if Daisy had actually made a retreat. As soon as he thought that she did, the ground erupted from underneath him. From the thick, earthy debris, Daisy bolted upwards and struck with an uppercut that hit the Soul Stealer in the chin like a cinder block. Daisy smirked as she landed, sure she had made a critical hit. Her expression turned dark when she heard Kokoro laughing.

"The hell's so damn funny?!" growled the Kruna of Earth.

"You!" Kokoro yelled. He snapped his head back to neutral and thrust a claw forward, looking to rip at Daisy's neck. Fortunately for her, she caught it in time by his wrist using one arm and threw her other arm at him to slam a punch into his waist. Backtracking, Kokoro made a subtle shift and rammed a kick at Daisy, his foot ripping through the ground as it came up. Again, she blocked, but needed both arms this time. She whipped around to land a roundhouse, only to have it countered with a kick from Kokoro of greater force that sent her into a tailspin onto the ground. Daisy rolled out of her momentum to flip onto her hands and feet, then was forced to the side as Kokoro leapt over and slammed his foot into the ground. She tried out her Flurry Punch, though her connections all only worked to provide minimal damage. Kokoro retaliated with a hefty knee that would have knocked Daisy comatose had she not flipped away. As she jumped out of her handstand, she could feel the distortion in the air around her created from the force of the Soul Stealer's blow.

The exchange that had been exclusively melee opened up when Kokoro started firing off more spheres of light. Three of the orbs flew towards Daisy in a scattershot pattern, forcing her to jump high overhead. The moment her feet left the ground, Kokoro was already bolting towards her through the air and cracked his body around to snap down a destructive kick. Although Daisy was able to put her arms up to block, it did no good, as she was slammed down with enough recoil to make her bounce off the floor. A quick jerk of her

body allowed her to regain control in time to dodge another sphere of light rocketing directly at her. Kokoro created two more light spheres and hurled them at Daisy as she was still moving. The Kruna kicked up a mound of earth and sent it hurtling towards the Soul Stealer in an attempt to clash the two elements. One sphere still managed to zip through and nearly had her if not for a timely sidestep.

Before she could do anything else, Kokoro was right in her face and smashed a fist into her abdomen. Several feet away she flew through the air, skirting along the ground with the Soul Stealer close behind to combo with a ferocious jump stomp that slammed her with enough force to split and kick up the ground around her. Daisy jerked herself to fling Kokoro's feet off of her and made a backflip kick to knock him away as she positioned herself on her hands and feet.

Then the Kruna's offense was on. From her crouched stance, she sprang with a torpedo-style kick to propel Kokoro even further away. Seizing the opportunity, Daisy darted towards her foe, her Crystal Fist materializing around her left hand. Kokoro did not have any chance to dodge and braced himself for a potentially debilitating hit, but a strange, ill-timed phenomenon prevented Kokoro from experiencing such a blow.

Just as Daisy got close to striking distance, her Crystal Fist began to glow. Cracking accompanied the illumination, and as she brought her arm forward to punch, she saw her Crystal Fist shatter. She instead hit Kokoro with a normal punch, the look of angered shock on the her face and the relieved surprise on his needing no explanation. All Daisy managed to do was knock the archfiend's torso back, as crystal shards fell around their feet.

Kokoro brought his head back around, laughing once more. "What's wrong, Sarasa? You can't, *keep things together* ?"

Daisy growled in fury. Her eyes drifted down towards her striking hand, the trembling of her entire arm matching her frustration. Her eyebrows angled deeper and the pressure around her jaw intensified as her grunting and her growling increased in volume.

"You are no warrior," said Kokoro. "You can't even execute an attack. That's just sad. I thought Terran taught you better. I feel far more justified in killing him now."

"Just... get out of my face," she barely said under her breath. "Move..."

Kokoro frowned, maintaining his position. "What was that?" It was an honest question, but the moment he asked, a sudden shift occurred in the atmosphere around them.

"I... I SAID MOVE!" Daisy screamed, slamming her fist down to the ground. The strike initiated her Crystal Smash, causing thick stalks and jagged mounds of crystal to jut from the ground around her in all directions. Kokoro went airborne and flew through a handful of smaller trees off to the side. The crystals around her fragmented and retracted back into the ground. The Kruna of Earth took off in pursuit, forming her Crystal Fist again and this time maintaining it all the way through from the time she began her dash to just as she jumped up and brought down a crushing blow to her foe's chest. At the conclusion of her attack, she made several backflips off and away for a swift return to the path.

"Unbelievable," grumbled Marissa. "The mutation was supposed to have weakened her far more than this. When I confronted her with Cerberus, she was reduced to little more than half of what she has just shown." The witch floated down to the graveyard floor and touched her feet to the ground. "It's like she was somehow able to restore some of her power and function in that spindly-hulk of a body she's in. Of course; Geno's screwing with me again."

"Are you trying to say that the Sarasa girl beat Kokoro?" asked Solovar.

"Pfft; of course not!" Marissa replied. "That fiend is getting back up."

"It sounds like this new being is coming close to rivaling you, Lord Arkana," stated Naraka.

Marissa giggled. "Even if that is the case, it won't matter once the Blood Moon is overhead and I have attained my boost in power."

King Boo flew into the graveyard, a floating pot trailing from behind. It was an ornamental piece inscribed with some form of ancient scripture and dialect around the mouth. "The pot is ready," the ghost said. "Do you have the ingredients?"

Solovar nodded. He pulled from one of his pockets a set of four White Fire Flowers. These Fire Flowers were substantially different from the ones King Boo was used to seeing. The petals were white, the stems were black, and the large stigma was a deep crimson. King Boo recalled Marissa saying that they were a forbidden plant and could only be obtained from a realm nestled underneath realities. "White Fire Flowers are only able to be harvested from a world between worlds," she had said. "A world where the only inhabitants are the souls of the forgotten... where you can not tell life from death... death from life..." She never said anything further on the matter. *Despite all her quirks, weird antics, and assorted craziness, I don't think I've ever came across someone so wicked and vile,* King Boo thought.

"Those better be eight, Solovar," grumbled Marissa. "I've told you before; it will not work with anything more nor anything less."

"I have the other four in another pocket," Solovar replied. "I realize this is too important of a task to mess up. Shall King Boo and I depart, Lord Arkana?"

"Yeah – get the hell outta here already," muttered Marissa. "Make sure the rest of the Sweeps are on standby. I'll be watching – but not until after this conflict between the Sarasa girl and the Kokoro fiend resolves."

Those were two very formidable techniques Daisy used, but unfortunately for her, it was not enough to keep the Soul Stealer down. Within moments, he was marching back from the forestry. He chuckled, taking up position across from Daisy. The Kruna was battered and damaged, but none the worse from the experience

relative to the amount of energy her two attacks burnt up.

"I must say, this hasn't been much of a fight," said Kokoro. "You held up for a little while, you made a few good moves, but I was always in control, whether you were aware of it or not."

Sweat ran down Daisy's head. Her body was starting to feel light and heavy at the same time. Her response was slow when Kokoro leapt at her and kneed her in the neck. For a moment after contact, the world around her moved in slow motion as she stumbled backwards and grabbed at her throat, gasping for air.

Kokoro snickered at the struggling Kruna of Earth. "In case you experience any form of oxygen shortage, please, don't forget to breathe."

Daisy paid the Soul Stealer no attention. She was too focused on maintaining consciousness. Just when reality returned to full speed in her perception, a jarring hit from the archfiend's elbow forced its way into Daisy's chest. The Kruna of Earth flopped onto the ground and sprawled out on her back, finding it even more difficult to respire.

"I'm quite disappointed in you, much like everyone else must be," Kokoro taunted. "Too bad Terran's not here to see you *fail* ."

Daisy winced as she forced herself back up. The gap between her and Kokoro's power was borderline insurmountable. She had only been weakened by the Betedaimon transformation, while Kokoro had grown more powerful, a large portion of his increase more likely than not due to the Master Pendant adorned around his neck. *I have to come up with something quick,* Daisy thought. *Or this is it...*

"This is what you get for crossing paths with me, worthless human!" screeched Kokoro. With a large swipe of his arm, a cutting slash of light sliced through the air. Daisy put her arms up to block, unable to do anything else in time. She tried thrusting her arms up to deflect the light, but it worked poorly. Even though she diverted the Light Cutter upwards, she still sustained a good deal of damage. Daisy found her body trembling in weakness.

"Slow, painful, torturous demise..." Kokoro breathed. "Your story is coming to an end, but mine is only just beginning." With a quick burst of speed, he dashed forward and slammed an elbow down on top of Daisy's skull. She clutched the sides of her head as her senses went fuzzy, just barely able to see that Kokoro was facing away from her.

"You should strike me now while my back's turned," said Kokoro. "What's wrong – don't tell me that you're throwing in the towel already! That figures. You... are... *weak* , Sarasa."

Angered more than she had been all day, Daisy sprang to her feet and threw a Smash Punch. Her attack would prove to be costly, for before she could react, Kokoro whipped around and caught her by her right arm. He latched on with both of his hands to lock Daisy in place and made a tight grip on her right elbow. The Kruna of Earth could not ignore the pressure she felt on the joint.

"You crushed my arm," grumbled the Soul Stealer, further tightening his grip. "Perhaps I should return the favor?"

Summoning the energy she needed in the nick of time, Daisy jerked herself just enough to get her left arm to grab onto Kokoro's to ease the pressure on her elbow. She contorted and twisted her body around for a reversal suplex to fling the archfiend away from her and save her arm from being compacted to broken bits. After Kokoro bounced a few times along the ground, he flipped out of the hitstun and sent a quick-moving beam of light in Daisy's direction. She was not ready for a counter maneuver at all, though she knew she should have expected something like that considering her opponent and how the battle had gone. The burst knocked her down fast, and it did not look like she would be getting up right away this time.

"Every time you do something like that, my hate for you grows even more," said Kokoro. He walked towards the sprawled out Kruna and held up a hand, conjuring a highly concentrated orb of light in his palm. "No more. I don't even want you breathing any longer than the time it takes to ready this burst of light to vaporize you."

Daisy clutched the ground and tried to press herself up, but Kokoro moved close and stomped a foot on top of one of her legs. There

was nothing she could do to get away, and she was too dazed to break free. The archfiend did not look the slightest bit happy.

"I would have waited an eternity for this," Kokoro muttered. "My hatred will kill you now."

Chapter XXII

Enter the Silence :

Kokoro intensified the energy gathering in his palm, his light orb taking on a unique, artistic shape as it revolved in the grasp of his hand. "In a matter of seconds, Sarasa, you will be vaporized. Do you have anything you'd like to say? That's too bad, because I'm not giving you a chance."

Daisy couldn't give any immediate response. Her throat was sore and burning. She coughed a couple times, still trying to regain her bearings from the previous string of attacks.

"That's right," Kokoro said, pulling back his arm in preparation to fire. "You've got nothing to say anyways. You brought this on yourself for standing in my way. Such heroic nonsense. You should've never tried to step to me. You and your failed virtues, your failed mentor, your failed parents, and your soon-to-be failed nation – Why don't you just lay there and cry for your pathetic, annoying life? I want your last action before death to be crying. Yes, the so-called mighty Daisy Sarasa, warped into a distorted human-beast abomination and weeping in a puddle of her own tears as she dies. Go on. I know you want to. Make my day."

"Why don't you just back off!" a voice shouted.

The Gemivado flew through the air, a special attack of Andrew's consisting of a revolving funnel of darkness that dispersed and scattered energies while delivering a mighty blow to its target. In this case, Kokoro was the target. The black and purple wave from the Kruna in black and purple had more than enough force to knock the archfiend off of Daisy's leg. The Gemivado's properties dispelled Kokoro's charged attack and prevented him from being able to use any kind of elemental counter to mitigate the knockback and damage. As a result, the Soul Stealer was forced back by the wall of shadow with no way of breaking free. Then the Gemivado cut off and was followed up with Bowser's Tavado angling in from

overhead. The flaming torpedos dove down and pummeled the fiend into the ground. As if that was not enough, a massive mound of stone hurtled towards the Soul Stealer and dropped dead on top of him. Daisy peered around and saw all of her teammates gathering by her.

"Get *rocked* , mate!" hollered Athelstan.

Andrew groaned, then started giggling. "That was pretty bad, Athelstan."

Warra and Neva helped Daisy get back to her feet and held her up until she was able to stand on her own. Daisy looked at the two with disbelief in her eyes. She started feeling something she wasn't sure she ever felt before.

"We will take over from here," said Warra. "Relax."

"You guys..." murmured Daisy. "You all really don't have to-"

"That was not a request," Warra replied, cutting off the Kruna of Earth.

A massive explosion erupted from the area around Kokoro. Smoldering debris filled the air as the boulder that Athelstan threw was launched up high and shattered to pieces. Out from the plumes and raining rocks marched the angry archfiend, a thirst for blood plastered on his face.

"Alright," Kokoro breathed. "Who wants to die first?"

A thick arrow of ice scythed through the air, narrowly missing Kokoro's head. Had he not tilted his neck, his skull would have surely been impaled. Neva was not shy, waving her hand at the archfiend to call attention to herself. She turned around, stuck her hips out and bent over so that she was looking at Kokoro through her legs, and flipped up a forceful middle finger.

"Okay then," the Soul Stealer said, long since out of patience. "How about ALL of you!" He brought his hands together overhead and channeled his energies to create an enormous orb of light many times his own size. With a wicked laugh, he threw down his arms,

launching the attack at the Kruna.

"Altogether!" Warra called out. "That burst is way too large!"

Bowser, Warra, Ramona, Athelstan, Andrew, Marut, and Neva all focused energy through their tools as they lined up in front of Daisy. In unison, they slashed from underneath on the incoming colossal blast to send it skyward. There was a second or two of lag upon contact in which the assembled elemental wielders seemed to be cleaving the light up instead of making a simple deflection.

"That is one *dense* orb of light!" said Ramona. "I thought it was just big, but no! Wow!"

"It kills me sometimes how people refuse to die," Kokoro muttered. "Don't worry; everyone has to die eventually. For having set me back far too much, I will ensure that you all die in cold blood."

"Let's count how many times Kokoro says 'die' during this fight," Andrew said.

Kokoro charged a crackling spheroid of light in one of his palms. "Your spirits are strong, but it makes no difference. They will die just as you will die. Rest assured, I'm going to laugh when you all die at my feet, by my hands. Oh yes. I. Will. Laugh."

"Five, six, and seven," said Neva.

"I WILL FRICKIN' MURDER YOU!" Kokoro screamed. He let loose his concentrated beam of light. Andrew and Neva looked ready to hurl shadow and ice at the fast-moving radiance, but there was something about the attack that almost seemed overwhelming.

"It's too strong; we gotta move!" Bowser shouted.

Everyone split to the sides, just evading Kokoro's attack in time. They heard the hum of the light beam as it buzzed behind them. The beam cut through the air above the path, sailing off into the distance. Marut looked back and saw some trees getting leveled by the attack. He wasn't sure, but he thought he also heard someone scream in pain. The cry of agony made him shudder.

"Is it just me or is Kokoro suddenly a lot more powerful than the last time we saw him?" said Andrew.

"Check that gem around his neck!" Daisy sharply pointed out.

All eyes were drawn to the all too familiar Master Pendant secured around the neck of the Soul Stealer. No one was prepared to ask when or how the gem made its way back into their world. Only Neva had no knowledge of the pendant's significance, having not seen it before.

"Kokoro! You need to get rid of that pendant around your neck right now!" Bowser urged.

"Oh, this thing?" Kokoro asked, grabbing the gem. "I don't think I can comply to that. This is the only reason I initially agreed to help Elkon out in the first place. I'm keeping this."

"You don't understand!" Athelstan yelled. "You have no idea what that thing is capable of!"

"I beg to differ," the archfiend replied. "I need this, Master Pendant, is it called?"

"How do you know what its name is?" asked Warra.

"Well, you see, this pendant talks to me," said the Soul Stealer. "Not through any verbal methods – most of the time anyways – but telepathically. I know more about this Master Pendant than any of you all know, and it will be my key to immortality *and* limitless power! The being that lies within is far beyond your comprehension and even further above your level."

Bowser looked at the Kruna of Stone. "Is there something you'd like to tell us, Athelstan?"

"Maybe," the brown-clothed fighter replied. "Now's not a good time though, but since you're probably gonna bother me about it anyways, I as well put this to use..." He reached his free hand into his pocket.

"What's more, this gem has told me what happened in the Twelfth

Dimension," said Kokoro. He shifted his gaze at Neva. "What are you? The substitute for the androgynous guy?"

"Why don't you focus on me?" Athelstan shouted, pulling out the Alkemei given to him by Rosalina. Kokoro's stare went straight to the pendant as the Kruna of Stone clipped its thick cord around his neck. The pendant's gem gave off a quick glow and turned brown.

"Where did you get that pendant?" Kokoro asked. "Is that an Alkemei? Which one is that?"

"You'll just have to find out!" Athelstan responded. He strapped his spear across his back and tapped into the power of the Alkemei Odina. A steady shine came over the pendant as he got himself ready for the next fight sequence.

"We haven't seen that from you, Athelstan!" Warra remarked. "You said you were going to the Comet Observatory to research the pendants! You didn't say anything about coming back with one!"

"Long story," Athelstan said. "Sorry, but I'm bound by Rosalina and the Cosmic Archives to not disclose any more information unless she gives me permission to do so."

"This is my lucky day," Kokoro hissed. "You all may have destroyed my collection of souls, but you will all help me start up a collection of Alkemei, and I'll start by ripping your head off with my own hands to strip *you* of your pendant, stone wielder." He bolted towards the assembled elemental wielders, his trajectory in line with Athelstan.

I hope you didn't give me a dud, Rosalina, Athelstan thought, lowering his stance. He had to time it right, for Kokoro came at him fast. He could feel the properties of the Alkemei Odina magnifying his already substantial physical strength. The moment Kokoro got close, Athelstan took a couple leaps forward and one to the side as the fiend came within arms length. Kokoro missed a slash with his claw, and then it happened.

Athelstan whipped his leg around, and slammed it into the torso of the Soul Stealer. For a second or two following contact, all the sounds in Kokoro's field of hearing violently reverberated, and all the

colors in Kokoro's range of vision were inverted and blurred. His world moved in slow motion as he floated backwards, then returned to full speed as he crashed and tore into the ground like a plow. The trench made from his skid must have stretched the length of a football field. Even when he stopped, he could not get up. He was too stunned to even blink.

Athelstan flicked a couple fingers at his Alkemei, impressed with its efficacy. "Man, this thing is cool!"

Bowser flared more flames around his claws. "You wanna see something cooler?"

"Hey, fire-spitter!" Neva shrieked, aiming her crossbow at Kokoro. "Ice is my element!" Frost flurried around her bayonet.

Daisy looked on, subtle shock on her face at the fact that her teammates all made their way out here to help her. She didn't know if she should be grateful, or offended. *Are they acting like I can't defend myself?* she thought.

"Let us know if you're able enough to get back into the mix here," said Warra. "We know you still want to get your shots in."

How could I have been so blind, Daisy thought. *It makes so much sense now. It took me storming off from Geno's Sanctuary and getting nearly killed in order for me to get it. They're here now protecting me not because I can't defend myself, but because I'm important to them. They're helping me because they want to help, not because they have to. They're showing that they care for me, so why can't I care for myself? If I'm worth something to them, then I have to be worth something to me!*

"No, not this time," replied Daisy. "I think... I need a breather for once."

"For once..." Warra repeated, shuttling energy through his axes.

When Kokoro finally came back to his senses, he wobbled back to his feet and lumbered towards the Kruna with irritation visible even from as far back as he had been sent. Now the Master Pendant took

on a glow to ready itself for a retaliation to match Athelstan's Alkemei. Despite the Kruna's best efforts, Kokoro was far from finished thanks to the Master Pendant's influence. Kokoro's eyes glowed as a Quantum Sphere formed in one of his hands.

"Yo! That's one of Elkon's techniques!" Andrew yelled.

"I guess it is!" Kokoro responded, hurling it at the Kruna. Bowser, Neva, Ramona, and Warra all leapt forward and blasted elemental power from their tools to counter the incoming attack. An explosion ensued, Kokoro grumbling with indignation once the residual power and fumes subsided.

The more Daisy saw her friends fight for her, the more inspired she became until suddenly, a red and yellow glow momentarily flickered around her torso. Her eyes went wide when she noticed the two flashes of color coming from her. *The root and solar plexus chakras,* she affirmed in thought. *They are ready to be purified...*

Marut released his Aerovado, a swirling torrent of inverted winds best described as several cyclones in one spinning in opposing directions. The nature of the attack would lead many to believe that the winds would cancel each other out, but this actually boosted the attack capacity of the technique. Kokoro took it head on and was swept up into the air. Bowser's second Tavado soared into the sky to deal even more damage to the archfiend before he plummeted to the ground. Kokoro managed to crack out of the hitstun at the last second, but still landed hard on his hands, a foot, and a knee.

When Kokoro looked up, he saw Andrew and Ramona both at ready with their tools and Athelstan in position to attack with his Alkemei still activated. Behind them, Warra looked to be preparing an attack of his own, and it was only a matter of time before Bowser, Neva, and Marut would have techniques ready. It was then and there that Kokoro made the decision to conjure his special orb of light for one final maneuver.

"Keep getting lucky, Sarasa," Kokoro said. "Keep getting lucky." He hurled his orb high into the air and made a circle with his hands. The pulsating orb of light was slow moving in its ascent.

Having remembered this move from the Ice Shrine, Bowser anticipated what was going to come next. "Everyone!" he shouted. "COVER YOUR EYES!"

"Here's a little Luminous Spark for ya!" Kokoro shouted, laughing as blinding light flooded the immediate area. No one could see anything, let alone track where Kokoro was going. Everyone was facing the other way with their eyes closed and covered. By the time the light cleared and the elemental wielders started to regain their vision, Kokoro was nowhere in sight.

"Coward," said Andrew. "He knew he was gonna be beaten and he ran away!"

"I'm surprised he doesn't use that blinding move to strike us when we can't see," said Bowser.

"It must use up too much energy," Warra suggested, replacing his axes across his back. "It has to only be a move intended to use as a last resort. It definitely makes sure that no one can follow him."

"Count on him being back," Bowser added. Warra nodded in response.

"You alright?" Marut asked the Kruna of Earth.

"What you should be asking, Marut, is why she's out here in the first place!" exclaimed Bowser. "You've got something you need to be doing, Daisy, and I don't think recess fits the bill!"

"Yeah, you're right," said Daisy. "Let's get back to Geno! I need to finish purifying these final two chakras! And, thanks, you guys. Thank you all. Really."

"Shouldn't we be concerned that Kokoro has the Master Pendant?" asked Ramona. "We know what happened the last time that gem was around."

In a surprising remark, Athelstan replied, "Let him keep it." The elemental wielders all looked at him like he had gone mad, but he kept firm in his statement.

"You better start explaining yourself!" Bowser snapped.

"Nope!" said Athelstan, smiling. "Rosalina's orders; cosmic orders at that. I'm bound by the Comet Observatory and Cosmic Archives. It may sound unorthodox, but Kokoro needs to hold onto it for now. He'll keep it safe."

"You must have lost it!" Andrew exclaimed. "Are your muscles sapping the energy from your brain, or did you replace it altogether with a rock? How is *he* going to keep the Master Pendant safe? The hell does that even mean?"

"He's clearly in control of it," Athelstan said. "I'm not saying he should keep it forever, but for now, let's not waste energy trying to pursue him. Wherever he went, he's not going to stray too far away. He'll be targeting us, and that means that he won't be targeting the world. We can all agree that that's fine, if not favorable, right?"

The Kruna and Neva returned to Geno's Sanctuary to see the cosmic entity sitting in the same spot he was in when they left. Upon sensing the incoming beings, he opened his eyes. Daisy sat down across from him without saying a word, and not a word was uttered from anyone else. The situation was serious, for success here would equate to the much needed progression for the Kruna of Earth. Several moments later, her body took on a red glow, shortly followed by a yellow glow. Geno watched each bout of illumination from start to finish. When all was said and done, Daisy opened her eyes and stared straight into Geno's. Her resolve could not have been more steely.

"Your remaining chakras have been cleansed," Geno said. "Now, we must proceed quickly, for the Silent Realm awaits."

In rapid succession, Geno executed a series of hand signs and traced a septagram in midair. This septagram of light expanded and tilted upwards over top of Daisy, proceeding to faze through her as it descended. The septagram lit up once it touched the ground in a manner similar to Kokoro's octagram attack, but Daisy did not move. It was all part of Geno's training, and she was aware of it without

him needing to verbalize it.

And then she became not so aware. Daisy was actually losing consciousness. In a matter of seconds, she was out cold. Her body remained in its sitting position, but she was not breathing. Her teammates wondered if her heart was still even beating.

Daisy opened her eyes and found herself in a saturated, shadowy, shiny version of Geno's Sanctuary. She stood up and looked all around, the essences of life forces and auras visible and scattered about throughout the air. Then she looked back at herself and her body and noticed that she was back to her normal form and shape – except for the fact that she had a mystic, ethereal hue to her much like the world around her.

"Daisy," a voice called out to her. It sounded like Geno, but he was nowhere to be seen. Daisy could not sense him either.

"What's all this, Geno?" Daisy asked, not mincing her words. "And where are you?"

"I am not with you at this moment in time," he replied. "I am merely the catalyst. I can not follow you into this realm, for this world calls out to your spirit and yours alone. This is the nature of these places; worlds known as 'Silent Realms.' They are domains of the soul, accessible only to those whose chakras are in a fully purified state and who know the associated ritual spell – that of which I invoked for you. I am contacting you now through advanced telepathy. Your spirit has temporarily separated from your physical body so that you may undertake the trial that you must complete here."

A smile eased its way onto Daisy's face. "A trial, you say?"

"To reach the inner peace with yourself that is necessary to have full control over the Betedaimon and therefore full power and mastery over your Nova Form, it is necessary for you now to overcome this trial and undergo spiritual growth. Your very chakras have split into seven different orbs of energy and have scattered throughout the Birabuto Kingdom, Muda Kingdom, Chai Kingdom, and Castle

Town. However, since they're your chakras, they have not gone where you yourself can't go under your own power. Hence, they will not be miles into the air or underneath the planet's mantle. Because of Easton Kingdom's location out in the sea, they will not be there either."

"And my task is to regain these chakras?"

Geno nodded. "Once you have reabsorbed your chakras, you will have successfully completed the trial. If you can not complete this trial, you will be stuck in the Silent Realm until you do."

"I don't think there'll be a scenario where I *don't* complete the trial," Daisy said. "Gathering seven scattered chakras; that doesn't seem very difficult."

"Your work here in the Silent Realm is not referred to as a trial without reason," replied Geno. "Spread throughout this realm, are Guardians – soulless vessels of ancient creatures that represent the inner conflicts and sources of turmoil that have accumulated within you over the years. Should you venture too close to a Guardian, they will pursue you and strip you of one of your chakras that you have recovered, and you will have to wrest it back from them. Fortunately for you, each Guardian is independent of one another, and will not arouse other Guardians in their pursuit of you. However, because of your experiences, you will have a lot more Guardians to have to get past than what is normally expected. You run the risk of disrupting other Guardians if you are not careful with where you lead your conflicts. This is why it is easiest to just stay clear of any and all Guardians, because one pursuer can become eight if you're not aware of your surroundings – *don't* engage if you do not have to."

Daisy crossed her arms and laughed. "I'm sure I can make short work of them."

"So am I. But since you are disconnected from your physical body, and since this is not a corporeal world, you have no access to your elemental abilities – that does not include your naturally developed abilities, but all elemental techniques and anything involving elemental energies is off-limits and restricted. Trying to use earth in any way will simply waste your time and focus."

Avoiding confrontation was not Daisy's style, but a battle without elemental enhancement would take far too long. *This stealth-type stuff is for Warra,* she thought, grimacing. *But for the sake of time, I'll just have to slip past the guardians. I can't afford to play around while I'm here; I need to rejoin my team in the waking world.*

"When you have assimilated all seven chakras, you must then come back to the septagram emblem emblazoned on the ground beneath where you currently stand, at which point you will be able to return to our living realm and to your body the way you had left it just before you entered the Silent Realm. Then, we can initiate the process of returning you to your normal form."

"So the time that I am here all depends on me," Daisy murmured. She peered down at the ground to take note of the bold, silver septagram bordered by a neon black circle containing some sort of ancient dialect that she could not recognize, let alone decipher.

"Not exactly," Geno replied. "Because of the circumstances of this trial, you are technically dead. Your body is uninhabited and in a suspended state. I would say that you have about seven hours minimum before the protection wears off and your body actually starts to initiate the death and decaying process."

"Seven hours?!" Daisy grunted. "Where am I supposed to look with only seven hours?!"

"The chakras won't be anywhere that you haven't been yet since your return to Sarasaland. That goes to show how much this trial is influenced by your mind. Let your heart guide your spirit. You must hurry. I will be awaiting for you on the other side, acting as the keeper of your body so that you are not disturbed while you complete this test. Good luck, Kruna Daisy."

Geno said nothing more, leaving Daisy to embark on her trial. She sighed and glanced around the surreal-looking area. Somehow, she knew that the next seven hours were going to be more arduous than she initially felt they would be.

' *Kruna Daisy,'* the earth wielder thought. *That's new. Well, I guess it's no different than saying 'Professor E. Gadd,' or, 'Princess Peach,'*

or... 'King Sarasa.' That's interesting, Geno. I would look into it more, but I've got something I need to do and less than seven hours to do it!

Geno explained everything to Neva and the Kruna that he had explained to Daisy. They all understood what Daisy had to do, though they were hesitant in accepting that none of them could help her. Geno assured he would keep close track of the time to ease any potential worries anyone had.

"She will remain like that until her trial is finished," said Geno. "That septagram will remain around her for the duration as well. I must act as the keeper for her body. She is not to be disturbed. Since her spirit has separated from her physical form, her body is liable to be stolen and taken over by any rouge souls. Again, this is something she must do on her own."

"And if she fails?" asked Warra.

"You must have faith in your friend," replied Geno. "You can not let doubt flood your mind. If she passes, she will be ready to reverse the Betedaimon mutation."

"But if she doesn't pass, or takes too long, her body will breakdown in her absence," said Warra.

"Exactly," said Bowser. "That's why she will succeed. That's the kind of high-stakes scenario she needs to be able to do her best, and she's always at her best in the clutch. She'll be fine when all is said and done. Now, if the stakes weren't as high, then I'd be worried."

"So what time is it now?" asked Ramona, looking upwards at the yellowing overhead haze. "It must be a bit past four o'clock now."

"FOUR O'CLOCK ALREADY?!" Marut screamed. Everyone gave him a strange look.

"What's your deal?" asked Andrew. "You don't like tea time? I love tea time."

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Marut," said Neva.

"Or a demon witch," Athelstan said with a laugh. Andrew and Ramona both giggled and Warra cracked a smile, but Marut did not respond. Bowser saw the spooked look in the Kruna of Air's face and kept as serious as could be. Athelstan noticed Bowser and Marut and muttered, "Oh, wait. You did see a demon witch, didn't you?"

" *The* demon witch, I'll bet," said Bowser, turning to address Marut. "Athelstan has at least some sort of reasoning for not disclosing what he hasn't told us, but you don't. If there's something involving Marissa, or something happened between you and her, or if she did something to you, then you need to tell us."

Marut took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. His voice quivered as he replied, "Okay, yeah, of course. Given what happened, I *have* to tell you guys. It's just... this is going to be tough to say..."

Chapter XXIII

Twilight Descends :

Neva and the Kruna made a short run through Castle Town to try and recruit as many fire and water wielders as possible. They amassed a group of a nearly even split of fifty wielders who both believed the story and were willing to go. Many more dismissed their prophecy as exaggeration, if not improbable or entirely asinine. Neva split the gathered wielders up into a handful of different teams and assigned them to different quadrants of Chai City, demanding that they be on the lookout for any sudden changes in the environment and for them all to be ready to respond should the inferno reach them. She also ordered them all to rally as many other fire and water wielders as they could and to get the residents to flee the city. "If they don't listen to you guys, then just scream that there's a terrorist attack," she had told them. She had decided that the Kruna would be best served staying towards the center to try and mitigate the spread of the flames and to confront whoever – or whatever – would be the cause of them. There was no telling what could be waiting for them once they arrived.

Once the plan was built, the teams of fire and water wielders headed for Chai City in trucks and karts. Neva and the Kruna took to the city on foot through Sarasa Field to see if they would be able to intercept any potential threat that could be heading there as well. They had enough time to; there were a couple of hours of sunlight left. The blue-gold, mostly cloudy sky overhead did nothing to foreshadow the looming doom that was to come.

Athelstan had decided to wear the Alkemei Odina as a part of his normal wardrobe, seeing as how it was no longer a secret that it was in his possession. Bowser and Warra kept pestering him regarding what he learned from the Cosmic Archives, but Athelstan refused to disclose any information. In his eyes, it was the best course of action. For so long as his teammates didn't know of the contents of the Master Pendant, the chances of its Elemental Seal being tampered with were greatly reduced. If that meant not pursuing

Kokoro for the time being, Athelstan was fine with that. Having to face a powered-up Kokoro would be a better scenario than having to face what lurked inside the Master Pendant, even though it was possible that Marissa would be able to overpower either one once the Blood Moon rose. But none of that could be thought of now, for the task at hand had to be dealt with. Kokoro would come later.

"The calm before the storm," said Athelstan as the team dashed to the northeast of Sarasaland.

"Yeah, the firestorm," muttered Andrew. "Bowser, Warra; you two are going to be on standby to quell the fire if it appears, right?"

"We will have to do the best we can," replied Bowser.

"Marut, I hope this vision of yours turns out to be wrong," mumbled Ramona. "No offense to you, of course."

Marut nodded. "I understand, but it can't be wrong. Marissa showed it to me through her Malocchio Eye! I saw it all happen! Bowser, Neva, Warra; everyone! Chai City will be wiped off the map and we'll all burn alive if we can't find a way to stop it!"

"And what if Marissa was lying?" asked Bowser.

"She was projecting it with that weird eye of hers!" Marut exclaimed. "I saw everything! The city, the fire, and all of us! I *heard* the screams of people, the crackling of the buildings, and the torching singe of cinders and ashes from the buildings and cars – even the air itself was being burned! I thought for a second I could actually *feel* the heat radiating from the flames! It was beyond intense! I'm being so serious!"

"That sounds to me like something to believe," stated Andrew. "I'm not questioning it one bit."

"Even so, Bowser's onto something," said Warra. "We don't know the extent of Marissa's Malocchio Eye. It could be a vision from the very near future that she showed you, or it could be a fabricated illusion she tried to pass off as a vision."

"Why would she want to do that?" asked Neva. "She'd be sending

us on a wild goose chase! She told me about King Sarasa's armory at the Great Canyon, and that wasn't a lie at all! So why would she want to lie this time to Marut?"

"Maybe she's not lying at all," suggested Bowser. "Maybe that vision of the future was in fact a conditional truth!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ramona asked.

"What I mean is, that future event she showed Marut was only possible on the condition that she actually showed it to Marut," said Bowser. "The moment she told him, the vision she showed him became our future. Had not she not shown it to him, we would not have known, and therefore, although Chai City still would have been burnt down, we ourselves would not have been consumed by the fire."

"But how is that possible?" asked Andrew. "For that to be the case, she would have had to pull the vision of one future from one chain of events that didn't even happen – or hadn't even happened yet at the time she pulled that future – so that she could make us believe that it was inevitable!"

"Or, is it actually inevitable now that we're heading there..." Warra said. His voice trailing off coincided with the ceasing of everyone's running. The seven elemental wielders stood spread out on a path just past the border into Chai Kingdom, Chai City waiting just under a handful of miles further northeast.

"I'm really scared guys," Ramona whimpered, shaking in place.

"I'm getting pretty spooked myself," said Athelstan.

"Me too," murmured Bowser. "I smell a trap. But we can't turn back. We would be failing our duty as Kruna. Being guardians of the elements means we are guardians of this planet!"

"The rest of you all can do what you want," said Andrew. "I'm going to that city and I'm going to do everything I can to stop the hellfire, even if all I can do is stall it. If it's my end because of it, then so be it, but at least I will have been able to save several times more lives

than I would just making sure I saved myself. We're facing what could very well be certain demise, so I don't expect you all to want to partake in such a thing."

"Then you don't know us yet," replied Warra. "I'm going. I'm not turning my back on others."

"My grudge is with King Sarasa and his men, not the people of Sarasaland," said Neva. "The people here have had to deal with too much. We must do what we can."

"That sounds more like it, Neva!" exclaimed Athelstan. "And I'm with you all too!"

Bowser looked at Ramona and Marut. "No one will think any less of you two if you want to stay safe and out of harm's way. What we're about to do is borderline suicidal, not to mention very likely to fail. There's no reason you have to join us and potentially die as well."

"Yes, there is," said Ramona, her heart heavy. "You guys are my friends, and this nation is suffering under a shroud of wickedness. We've faced life-threatening situations before – although, not quite as frightening... Let me stop talking before I discourage myself. I'm coming!"

Marut's voice quivered as he replied, "Hey, we're all young, right? We need to be doing wild and crazy things like this, right?"

"It's settled then," said Bowser. "Let's go! We may be doomed to fail or doomed to fall, but we're gonna give our all! Let's show the world why we are Kruna!"

The Kruna and Neva all resumed their run to Chai City, moving with increased vigor and urgency. Through their perception, the sun faded fast as gold and red overtook the landscape. Soon, they would take on something that was not of their mortal world. They all felt a chill, as they were about to face what could turn out to be their most difficult challenge yet. It was also quite possible that at least one of them might not make it back, and despite their willingness to take on the looming inferno, this was not lost on their minds.

"You know what," mumbled Athelstan, glancing at the peaceful, vibrant sky without a break in stride. "At least it'll be a great evening for fishing."

Traversing through the Silent Realm of Sarasaland, Daisy had successfully located and absorbed her root chakra after finding it near the entrance to Geno's Sanctuary. She sped down the paths of Sarasa Field, taken aback by the environment around her. She could not get used to the unusual texture – or lack thereof – and effects of the Silent Realm version of Sarasaland. Her body looked normal, but a silvery-black-teal hue encircled and radiated around her. This would not have been so disconcerting if the world around her was not all tinted in the exact same manner. It was made worse by the fact that some areas of the landscape at times seemed to be unsettled, flowing in small wisps much like the aura surrounding her. Several times during her run, she had to question whether she was bringing her feet down on solid ground. Once or twice, she wondered if she was just going to fall through the ground with the wrong step.

This is like a beta world of some game for my adventure , she thought, once more taking a very questionable step. This time it was on some shining silver liquid that had no discernible source. *If it weren't for my footsteps, I'd be hearing myself think.*

There was no sound being produced anywhere. Then again, everything was still. Even the Guardians she would slow down to slip past were still. They would probably become animated and make a ton of noise once Daisy disturbed them, but she wasn't trying to do that. She was surprised she hadn't alarmed any of the Guardians so far, considering she was the only one in the entire realm making any noise. Every footstep the Kruna of Earth took reverberated around the environment. Then she remembered the light tread she developed in her Betedaimon form to offset her hunched, imposing lumber, prompting her to lighten her strides and think less about trying to avoid the Guardians.

She thought she was making great time until Geno's voice echoed, "Just a little more than five hours remain, Kruna."

"What? You gotta be kiddin' me!" Daisy yelped. She was about ready to kick it into high gear, but her eyesight caught a green tendril of swirling light shooting up into the air from a spheroid of the same color. It was the heart chakra, and it hovered at the top of a cliff-edge. She made a break for the short slope but didn't catch the Guardian waiting around the corner on the other side of a tree. The biomechanical being awoke and threw a slash at Daisy with one of its claws. With a swift reaction, she slipped out of the Guardian's reach and countered with a brutal uppercut. In rapid succession, she chained into a Smash Punch and a shoulder bash, knocking the Guardian down and out cold.

"I don't have time to be dealing with you," Daisy grumbled. Fortunately, no other Guardian had been disrupted. She continued up the slope to retrieve her heart chakra, this time directing full awareness to her periphery to ensure she didn't have any surprises lying in wait. As with the root chakra, the heart chakra gravitated towards her once she was in proximity to it and dispersed itself into her essence.

Now I need to scout for the other five, Daisy thought. She leapt off the cliff and took off running the moment she landed back on the path.

King Sarasa stepped onto the roof of the Central Castle. It was at the northside of the castle roof that access to the skywalk was located. Opening the gates, he marched up the stairs and onto the grand walkway. It was this vast and expansive skywalk stretching out into and over the northern sector of Castle Town that he labeled, "Bellbridge." He took great pride in this architectural brilliance. In his eyes, he had brought the world one step closer to ascending beyond terrestrial limitations, for what he had directed was the construction of a map of roadways in the sky. Although there were countless anchoring columns and support beams sticking into the ground, ensuring the safety of automobiles or anything of similar weight would need more testing. Such testing would need to be done at a later date, for in less than three weeks, Bellbridge would be open to the public. It would start off as a tourist attraction, a landmark, and among other things, a precedent for things to come.

The entrance to Bellbridge from the Central Castle roof was King Sarasa's personal gateway. To the west was a large, incremental ramp that went all the way from ground-level up to the plateau of the Bellbridge walkways. The difference in elevation between Bellbridge and the surface must have been about a quarter of a mile at the *very least* . Because most of the skywalk was transparent, sunlight or sight of the sky in general was not much of an issue at all for everyone down below. Sure, there were more shadows over the northern half of Castle Town, but that was largely overlooked by the magnificent magnitude of the great structure.

The design of Bellbridge was something the world had never seen before. It was like someone had taken a portion of the city's streets and projected a Plexiglas-metal combination copy up in the sky. The many branching and intersecting paths were lined with lampposts, guardrail-walls to prevent people from falling over, and tunnels – some with the transparent Plexiglas-based frame, and some with an open metal design – that added plenty of character to the skywalk. Built into the guardrail-walls were lights of several different colors to illuminate the sky at night and brighten the way for whoever came through. And as twilight descended upon Sarasaland and the sun began to hide behind the horizon line, the king saw some of the lights turn on.

Of the several paths and intersections of Bellbridge, one such path led to a large, circular field about a hundred yards in diameter that was built into the southern side of the Sarasaland Campanile. The size of the circular area nearly matched the size of the campanile's massive clock face, and it was not too far down from the clock either. King Sarasa had already made sure the hourly bells of the Sarasaland Campanile were toned down for this reason. There was already enough going on, and he didn't want to address complaints of the deafness attained from Bellbridge even if the outer regions of Castle Town couldn't hear the clock bells.

As he walked through the many paths of Bellbridge, a sense of joyous pride consumed him. The construct was an ambitious endeavor and equally expensive, but it would have never came to be without his pushing for it. Bellbridge's design and existence would forever be a part of his legacy just as it would be a permanent

part of Sarasaland.

Further up into the sky beyond even the height of the Sarasaland Campanile, Marissa observed the king and his construct. She sat on her broom, much more intrigued with Bellbridge than with King Sarasa. The circular field-like area connected to the campanile garnered most of her attention.

"Perfect," she murmured, snickering in a sonorous, insidious tone. Her broom then took off, carrying her towards the northeast.

The limo pulled up to Chai City's Concert Hall, several game enthusiasts and assorted fanatics lined up around the entrance under the darkening veil of the prime time hours and awaiting one of the many heralds of modern era entertainment. From the shining silver and purple vehicle emerged the stocky man in the full-bodied yellow suit. A stripe pattern of white-purple-white ran down the outside of his pants all the way to his trademark pointy green shoes.

"There he is!" one of the teenagers in the crowd called out. "The mastermind behind it all!"

The emblem on both sides of his hips was a bomb underneath two overlapping Ws, all in shades of blue. It was this emblem that was second to only a select few in the gaming world and that made most other competitors seem third-rate. Cheers erupted from the crowd as the man trotted his way down the aisle with his advisers and associates close behind. He tipped his iconic cap to the masses as he swiveled back and forth between each side of the lane.

"Mr. Wario!" a kid hollered from up front. "When's the next installment of Wario Ware coming out?"

"It's on its way, kid," Wario replied. "If you don't pay attention, you're gonna miss it!" He chuckled at the reference he made to the style of his franchise's gameplay.

"Mr. Wario!" shouted a reporter. "What do you have to say about Macrohard's criticisms of your games?"

Wario pulled on his suit and grinned. "Ah, yes. We at Wario Ware Inc. pride ourselves in delivering high-quality products at a reasonable, budget-friendly price. What company doesn't have a few defects here and there? We have the best customer service in the industry to tend to any product issues. There's a reason we have been able to maintain a satisfaction rate of ninety-five percent since our inception! Now, I would say something about Macrohard's 'Blue Diamond of Death' incidents with their MSquare 270 or the mixed reviews they received for their latest installment of 'Corona,' but I'm not the kind of guy who wants to partake in the exchange of disparagement. Like I said, we are focused on giving our fans the best we can offer!"

The reporter nodded. "And what kinds of announcements can we expect during tonight's conference?"

"Well, you'll just have to stick around and see!" said Wario. "We've got 'til midnight, and we'll use as much time as we need. Who knows; we might even run over!" He slowly turned back to the ground, shouting, "Especially since we've got DEMOS!"

The crowd went crazy. Wario continued on his way into the Concert Hall as chants of his name boomed through the air. No matter how things turned out, it was definitely going to be one night to remember.

Chapter XXIV

Against Thee Heinously :

The autumn season in the northern hemisphere of Earth made night come much too fast. Before they knew it, Neva and the Kruna were dashing through Chai City underneath a pitch-black sky. The hellfire could start at any moment, and they were only just making their way through the outer parts of the metropolis. As they bolted down the streets, they caught sight and sound of muffled confusion among the crowds.

"Word is spreading quickly, I'm sure," said Bowser.

"It's got to be just after seven o'clock," Warra said. "Since we didn't intercept anyone on our way here, the casters of the inferno must have beaten us to the center of the city!"

"But I don't see anything suspicious," added Neva. "So that means that nothing happened yet!"

"Yet, is the key word," muttered Andrew. He sounded uncharacteristically grim, as if he was sensing something the others weren't that was giving him extra cause for concern.

Chai City was remarkably built up despite King Sarasa's frugal usage of funds on the kingdoms of Sarasaland. The buildings were tall, lights of several colors shone all around, and six-way intersections were spread throughout the town. The citizens all looked to be middle-class at the absolute least. How Chai City fared so well compared to the rest of Sarasaland was an anomaly.

But maybe that's why this place is a target for the hellfire! Bowser thought, his eyes flaring wide-open.

"We need to keep heading up this street!" Neva yelled. "This will lead us straight to Chai City Town Center!"

"Hold on a second," said Marut. " I don't like that idea at all, freeze-

brain. We're not trying to go shopping – we're trying to get to the center of the city!"

"No, air-head!" Neva snapped. "Chai City Town Center is a shopping center built in the center of Chai City!"

The seven elemental wielders continued their run through the streets. They were getting winded as time passed, but the adrenaline from the impending event kept their energy high. None of them had any intentions of turning around and heading back, even if the hellfire was cast before they could stop it. In the same vein, their focus was laser-sharp. Nothing distracted them from getting to the shopping center, and they had no intention of making any stops.

"Help me!" a female voice called out.

Andrew skidded to a halt and turned in the direction he heard the new voice. The sound more likely than not came from an alleyway off to the side between two buildings. A scream of torment from the alley confirmed this.

"Help me!" the voice called again. It appeared Andrew was the only one that heard her, for the rest of his teammates only stopped once they noticed he wasn't alongside them.

"Hey! What's the big deal, shadow-maker?" Neva yelled.

"You guys go on ahead!" Andrew called out. "I'll catch up! Just go!"

"Andrew!" Ramona shouted. "Where are you going?"

"He said he'll catch up, Ramona – c'mon!" Bowser called back, the others already continuing towards CCTC. Ramona followed the rest of the team as Andrew made a sprint for the alleyway.

From an overhead portal in the air above Chai City Town Center, King Boo and Solovar emerged. The white and black-clothed Black Mage dragged the pot out before his ghostly partner dispelled the portal. The two beings then hovered in the air, taking a moment to survey the surface. Not a single person noticed the two up in the

sky, not in the immediate vicinity at least.

"Should we wait for more people to enter the city?" asked Solovar.

"They'll catch on to us if we wait," replied King Boo. "We don't know the commuting patterns here anyways. We must start now."

Solovar released his hold on the conjuring pot to let it float on its own, then he pulled out all eight of the White Fire Flowers. One by one, he split the heads from the stems and let both pieces of each flower drop in the pot. King Boo sent out a wave of mystic energy to bathe the flower pieces while Solovar maintained an asymmetrical hand sign and concentrated with his own mystic power. From underneath his sleeve, the Black Mage pulled a long, thick syringe filled with blood. As Solovar emptied the contents of the syringe, King Boo channeled more mystic power to create a Paranormal Portal with special, greatly altered properties to link with the base of the conjuring pot.

Still maintaining the same hand sign, Solovar began to sing the special incantation necessary for the spell to start:

Release...

Let inferno burn through thee,

Ripple through the air, and everything you see,

Will crumble down to the ground,

Let ashes fill the air...

Ignite the wild flare...

It consumes all-

Flames began to crackle within the conjuring pot, the heat radiating up into the air as the sky around them took on a faint, white glow. No one down below paid any attention. The residents and townspeople seemed too preoccupied with other things to notice anything above. With more focus than before, Solovar continued the incantation:

Unseen...

Limbo's immortality,

Forbidden realm that scoffs, at our reality,

Where no mortal can breathe,

A timeless prison cell...

One step away from Hell...

Unleash your fire!

The pot trembled as the portal within began to build up an immense amount of power. Some massive source of energy was trying to force its way through, but was not quite ready to escape yet. The ritual spell needed more time, and it was up to King Boo and Solovar to maintain the link between the realms while the inferno prepared itself.

"You should get a record deal," said King Boo. "Why are you working for Marissa? Why are any of you Black Mages working as her Sweeps?"

"She brought us in when we had no place to go," replied Solovar. "She was one of the nicest people we knew before several hundred years of immortality drove her mad."

"Immortality made her mad?" asked King Boo. "Then why do so many people want it?"

Solovar shook his head, filled with sorrow. "That is the million-dollar question, King Boo."

"Help me!" the voice continued to scream. Andrew dashed through the alleyway in search of the source of the cries, but found no one. Soon, he ran up to a high, chain-link fence. It was a dead end.

"Help me!" the voice shouted again.

"Where are you?" Andrew asked. "I want to help, but I don't know where you are!" He had made a handful of turns and went behind several buildings to get to where he was. He had nowhere he could go but backwards, unless he were to bust through the fence.

"Help me! Help me..." the voice cried once more. It sounded so close. "Help! Help... me..."

"What..." Andrew mumbled, confused.

The voice suddenly turned dark as it continued calling out. "Yes... Help me... Help me please... heh... heh... heh... heh..."

A rhythmic clanging of metal against asphalt picked up. It reverberated and echoed throughout the alleyway as it increased in volume. Andrew stood with his back to the fence, his eyes shifting around to try and pinpoint the origin of the sounds.

"What's going on?" Andrew called out. "Reveal yourself!"

"Kru-na..." the voice echoed. "Come out to pla-ay!" Although he had yet to encounter the being face to face, Andrew was now all but certain that Marissa Arkana had been the voice that lured him here. As the Kruna of Shadow's eyes darted around the area, the demon witch continued her haunting, escalating chant. "KRU-na... come out to PLA-ay. KRU-na... come out to PLA-AY!"

"Your tricks are not going to work on me," said Andrew. "The only thing I fear is tight places."

"Geez, you're no fun," muttered the voice. From the shroud of a mystic cloud formed in front of Andrew emerged the demon witch. The shadow wielder's gaze was immediately drawn to the strange marking on her forehead, well aware of what that marking revealed when split open.

"By the way," Marissa began. "Thanks ever so much, deary, for your efforts against King Sarasa at the Grand Canyon – or should I now say, the Colossal Hole..." Her voice trailed off into a series of giggles.

"I take it you're the notorious demon witch, Marissa," said Andrew.

"Yes, I am," Lord Arkana replied. "I am the demon witch. You can call me Marissa, or you can refer to me by my full name, Marissa Arkana, *or* Marissa the Demon Witch, or you can be formal and address me as Lord Arkana – emphasis on 'lord' – or better yet..." Her oversized pointy hat morphed into a hunter's cap with a scope attachment, at which point she unlimbered her broom and held it like a rifle. "Marissa the Hunter!"

Andrew pulled out his blades. "Alright, what are you up to? I'm *this* close to taking you down right now and forcing you to change Daisy back to normal! She's trusting us to take care of business while she's readying herself to bring you to your knees, but I'll be happy to take her place, so don't tempt me!"

Marissa chuckled, shaking her head. "Such spirit – will be a shame to snap it like Christmas-time gingersnaps." She taped her hunter's cap with her broom to revert the hat back to normal. "I could show you horrors, Kruna, that would render you a soulless, ravaged hulk. Will the Elder of the Cosmos and her associates then look upon you with the same 'honor and respect' they do now, or will they exile you in shameful mediocrity and isolation? Dare me so that we may find out."

"NOOOOO! MY MUSHROOMS!" screamed the merchant koopa.

"Quit fooling around you guys!" Bowser barked.

Marut and Ramona both had slammed into a cart loaded with Super Mushrooms that had emerged from a hidden driveway. The merchant koopa was flailing his arms in panic and distress. Not only were all the Super Mushrooms scattered about, but the front half of his cart was a wreck.

"You're all gonna pay for this!" the merchant koopa hollered. "Eight thousand coins!"

"Uh-oh," Marut mumbled. He and Ramona launched themselves to their feet and took off up the street with the rest of their team.

"Hey!" the merchant yelled. "GET BACK HERE!"

Marut kicked it into high gear and turned around to return to the merchant and his scattered Super Mushrooms. He grabbed four with each hand and then whipped back around to catch up with the others. "Sorry, dude!" he called back at the merchant.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" the merchant koopa screamed in rage.

A handful of blocks up the street, Neva and the Kruna continued racing towards Chai City Town Center. Aside from the noise and discussion among the many people on the streets and throughout parks, all was still relatively tranquil and calm. The closer they got to the center of the city, the more normalcy seemed to prevail.

"The guys we sent out are taking too long to spread the warning," said Bowser. "This is cutting it way too close!"

"We just have about a mile more or so to go," Neva said.

"Wait – what's that up there?!" asked Athelstan, pointing to the sky.

Further up ahead, two airborne, animated silhouettes were visible. The air around them was turning a sickly, misty grapefruit red and orange. Flickers of torches and fluttering flames sparked around the figures and a third, larger implement beside them.

"It's starting," said Bowser.

"No..." Warra mumbled with a gasp.

"It doesn't look like it's been released yet," said Ramona. "We can still catch up to it and stop it!"

"Run faster!" Neva yelled at the others.

Andrew stared at Marissa, eyes fierce and mouth agape. "How do you know-"

"About Rosalina and the Comet Observatory?" Marissa said, cutting him off. "You should also ask how I know – and how you don't – that you and your friends are the *only* team of Kruna currently in existence. That's right. One of the most respected and revered titles throughout the cosmos rests on your pathetic shoulders. Maybe there's some independents scattered about *under the radar* , but they've resigned to the fact that they're unable to do anything but be fodder for those with real power. Ask Geno."

"What's Geno got to do with this?" asked Andrew.

Marissa's Malocchio Eye opened. "In time, you'll learn, shadow wielder. But for now, I do believe that there's something you should see. Nay, there's something that I want to show you."

"We're in a dark alleyway in the middle of a huge city. What could you possibly have to show me back here?"

"That's an excellent question, Kruna," Marissa replied with a chuckle. Her Malocchio Eye flashed and took on a faint glow. "And I say that because I don't know myself. So why don't we both see? All I require is that you put away your blades."

"And if I don't?"

"Why shouldn't you? I'm not being hostile, so why are you trying to be the instigator, so-called righteous and noble guardian of shadow?"

Andrew grimaced and clutched his blades tighter. "How do I know you're not trying to trick me?"

Marissa pulled her arms as far back behind her as she could and marched her way up to Andrew's face. She left less than a half-foot of space between their eyes, although her taller build had him by a couple inches. With this bold maneuver, she was herself wide open to attack. Andrew stood his ground as the demon witch inched a little closer, almost egging him on to attack.

"Go ahead," Marissa said, breathing in his face. "Strike me now. Since I'm obviously such a threat to you, why not attack me now that

I've made myself vulnerable? Surely I must be trying to trick you."

Marissa kept a blank face and did not move. Andrew did not second guess himself when he sheathed his blades, but it took him a few moments to make the decision. Upon doing so, Marissa took a handful of steps back and away from him.

Andrew didn't know what to think of Marissa, for everything the demon witch said or did was cryptic to the point of being nonsensical. But he was in no position to try and attack – he only had about a foot of space between him and the fence behind him. At this point, he was more concerned with getting back to the others and doing what he could to combat the impending fire. If Marissa really had no hostile intentions at that moment, then a confrontation with her could wait if it meant speeding things up.

"Now, let's see what my Eye can reveal for us," murmured Marissa.

King Boo had only started focusing more mystic energy into the conjuring pot when the first wave of water shot through the air, just narrowly missing his face. He and Solovar both glanced down at the street below to see the Kruna and Neva running into view. The second burst of water from Warra rocketed up and would have demolished the conjuring pot had Solovar not put up a shield of dark power to block.

"Look; the peons of pathetic!" King Boo yelled down. "You punks don't know when to quit, do you? You're all worse than that Green 'Stache guy!"

"We should've expected you guys would be up to something like this," said Bowser. "We're gonna make sure that fire doesn't touch down here!"

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," said Solovar, charging a sphere of darkness in his hands. "I need to prevent you from interfering while King Boo completes the task at hand."

By this time, the stir had attracted attention from nearby crowds of

people. Although some fled inside of the buildings or down the street, the majority of the citizens acted as bystanders. The developing situation confused all of them.

"It's just as you said, Bowser," muttered Ramona. "Word must not have spread quick enough from the outside in."

Neva turned to the crowds of people. "What are you all doing? GET OUT OF HERE! This place is about to go down in flames, so unless you want to be cremated into oblivion, BEAT IT!"

The ice wielder's remark caused most of the people to start moving away. They didn't show any urgency, but they were steadily leaving the area. The few that stayed wanted to spectate the scene out of curiosity, having not seen any of these beings before.

"Kruna!" Bowser yelled. "Take aim and fire! There's only one of those Black Mages there!"

"And I am sufficient enough to hold you off," Solovar assured, hurling his shadow sphere down at the assembled elemental wielders. Ramona leapt to the front of the group and batted the burst away with her broadsword, only for a fire hydrant to blindside her.

"Watch it!" Warra warned, taking note of Solovar's glowing opposite arm. "It looks like that Black Mage can exert some sort of mystic pull on objects!"

"Left himself wide open!" Marut called out. As the Kruna of Air sent a rushing gust of wind into the sky, Bowser breathed a thick stream of flames to follow the cutting winds from behind. Solovar put up another wall of shadows for defense and fortified it with mystic energy, altering the properties of the wind and flames it deflected. Marut's air split down the middle and spread like a banana peel, then curled inwards to envelope Bowser's fire, effectively canceling out both elemental bursts.

"Now he's combining elemental techniques with magic," said Ramona.

"All the Sweeps can do that," added Neva. "Be careful with your

attacks!"

"Just flank him!" Warra yelled. He got set to release a stream of water while Neva and Ramona ran over to get behind King Boo and Solovar. The three Kruna sent bursts of their respective elements up, only for Solovar to erect a magical rotating wall of shadow that not only diverted the blasts but made them seek out and lock on to their creators. Warra and Ramona deflected their blasts with their tools away and into the sky. Neva couldn't do anything but dodge, though the frosty burst made a sharp curve and caught her in the back regardless.

"Switch out! Switch out!" King Boo urged. Solovar pulled back and took over the duties for strengthening the spell, allowing King Boo the opportunity to sub into the fight. The royal spectre unleashed a colossal claw of impure shadows down below as his first move. He slammed the dark claw into the ground, creating massive ripples in the asphalt and scattering the Kruna like a bunch of cheap toys. King boo dispelled his shadows, cackling and grinning in satisfaction with his handiwork.

"I hate that laugh so much!" Neva yelled, forcing herself back up. "Why is your laugh so annoying?"

"The same reason your voice is so annoying!" King Boo shot back.

"Never mind that," said Bowser. "We need to do something to disrupt that spell."

"Where's darky?" King Boo asked. "I like pounding him into oblivion like the punching bag he is! If we were in a prison, he'd be my prison bi-" He cut himself off to bat away the burst of light that Ramona sent at him. "Aw, did I make the wittle wightbulb upset?" He then shot a bolt of shadow to counter the second, more furious burst of light that came his way.

"How... How the hell did he get so strong?" Bowser muttered. "It seems like he's become more powerful than he was at Birabuto, and even then, he was more powerful than he was at Elkon's Tower!"

Not a single one of the Kruna were prepared for what came next.

King Boo removed his crown and tilted his head down to reveal a large, crimson and black marking that matched the emblem featured on both Marissa's forehead and throughout her outfit.

"The Mark of the Witch," Solovar explained, rolling up his sleeves. The same mark was on the outside of both of his upper arms. "Marissa has access to plenty of forbidden spells that she has collected and honed over the years. Those who submit to Lord Arkana's rule receive a power boost that continues to build within the recipient for up to eight days after."

"Which means you won't see my full power for another four days," said King Boo. "I still have room to grow, and as you've probably figured out, the Black Mages have theirs working for them as well. I don't like the word, 'submit,' though. 'Alliance,' I prefer."

"Of course, she has the mark herself," Solovar added.

Athelstan channeled into his advanced stone elemental powers to focus on the nearby lampposts. "Screw them markings! I'm a metal addict! Take my lunch money... and get me some METAL!" He ripped four of the lampposts from the ground and projected them to surround King Boo and Solovar. Neva combined her magnetics with Athelstan's metal control to try and slam the lampposts together to crush the two spellcasters, but four, highly-charged lasers zapped the metal masses and sent them flying off into nearby buildings.

"Ramona!" Athelstan yelled. "What did you do that for?"

"I didn't do a thing!" Ramona replied.

At that instant, a streak of lightning struck Ramona, stunning her and evoking intense pain throughout her body. Strangely enough, the lightning continued to run through her as it jumped to Warra, then Marut, then Neva, then Bowser, and then to Athelstan, zapping all six of the assembled elemental wielders. The culprit of the maneuver, Tamara, emerged from down the street behind them along with Naraka, Machula, and Maki. Solovar and King Boo swapped duties again, placing the shadow Sweep back on the offensive with his four Black Mage counterparts. The Kruna regrouped, enemies on the ground to one side of the street, and

enemies up above on the other side.

"You're all surrounded, Kruna," King Boo said. "It's over!"

"All we have to do is stall until King Boo and Solovar complete the ritual," said Naraka.

"We're just moments away," added Solovar. "So give up and run away."

"Give up and run away?" Athelstan repeated. "I don't think so!"

"We need you to go Rainbow, Bowser!" exclaimed Warra.

"I can't!" Bowser responded. "That will drain me of my remaining energy; energy that'll be needed to combat the inferno!"

"To Hell with all of this!" shouted Neva, taking aim at the conjuring pot with her crossbow. Before she was able to get off a shot, Maki blasted the crossbow out of her hand with a burst of ice. Bowser inhaled and let out a Great Fireball from his mouth, only for Machula to counteract it with a beam of light. Marut took aim with his ninjato, but Naraka stomped down a foot and caused the ground underneath of the Kruna of Air to tremor and knock him off balance. Machula chained together a few hand signs to cast a spell that made a giant Thwomp appear overhead. The Thwomp crashed down to the ground, cutting off the street and blocking the Kruna from making any attacks on King Boo or Solovar.

"You're dealing with us for the time being," said Machula.

"Let us explore," Marissa said to Andrew. "We will see what could have been, and what that means for you and your team."

Marissa's Malocchio Eye glowed and ate away at their reality. The world around them faded to the top of the tower that the Kruna and Elkon were at when Nova Daisy and Grekka fought. Andrew and Marissa stood along the perimeter wall of the roof with a view of the scene, but the events occurring at the center were much different from what he remembered.

"Gaze," crooned Marissa. "Study. Examine. For this is the outcome of an altered variable in an alternate world."

Andrew stared in horror as the scene in front of them unfolded. With the Master Pendant adorned, the alternate Andrew rocketed forward and stripped Grekka of his forearm machetes, charged them with shadow energy, and threw them at Daisy. The blades flew too fast for anyone to react quick enough, except for Daisy. Her heightened Nova Form senses kept her alert and able to dodge, or, at least allowed her to think that she dodged, for the alternate Andrew had used his illusion abilities to make everyone believe he had already thrown the blades. Two seconds later, the real blades pierced through the Kruna of Earth and ripped through her torso. With Daisy dead, Warra rushed forward in a fit of rage. The Master Pendant glowed, siphoning an exorbitant amount of power into the alternate Kruna of Shadow and materializing two arms from his back made entirely of shadow energy. All four of his arms then sprouted blades of pure darkness through the same method. Warra engaged with Andrew, but he couldn't last long pitting his two daggers against Andrew's four blades of pure shadow, and he too fell to the ground in a gory mess. Before anything else happened, Elkon teleported behind Andrew and stabbed him with his Dimensional Saber, trapping him in a rift that transported him to another dimension.

"Interesting," said Marissa. "So Daisy dies, the Kruna of Water dies, and you get thrown into the unknown. Judging from what I'm observing, Daisy's the one that is supposed to stop that guy that just stabbed you, correct?" Andrew nodded at the demon witch, keeping his eyes fixed to the events transpiring in the vision.

"It is now time for all of you to meet your end," Elkon murmured. "I can't allow you to interfere with my plans any longer." The space distorter then proceeded to engage in battle with each of the remaining Kruna. Marut was the first to die, followed by Ramona, and then by Grekka. Bowser and Athelstan tag-teamed and managed to last a little longer, but they too soon fell.

"Now they're all dead," Andrew said. "And because Elkon and Daisy never fought, Daisy can't convince him to stop his plans." His voice lowered. "That means he re-corrupts the elements, and..."

Everything around Andrew and Marissa contorted and dissipated away, and they found themselves back in the alley they were in before. Reality was the same way they had left it, but Andrew could not unsee what he had just watched.

"I hope this goes to show, Kruna, that you don't know what you're doing," said Marissa. "None of your lot does. Poor bunch of Kruna; relying so much on your strength and 'values' and your elemental powers and tools, and not a single one of them will do you any bit of good here. I must ask; who are you really? The majority of your kind throughout history are just pure and noble 'heroes' still striving for right in a universe of chaos and suffering, entirely unwilling to admit that your day has long since been over. The few Kruna with the longest careers are those who realize their losing efforts and master the art of running and hiding... sorta like Geno..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Andrew snapped. "He's a noble saint compared to you!"

"Why has he kept himself in that mountain cove of his then? The next time you see him, ask him. Ask him about how pathetic he is – that is, should you decide to put the art of running and hiding to use and save yourself from the inferno..."

"We're stopping this fire!"

"I personally wouldn't recommend such an effort," Marissa said with a giggle as she pointed to the sky. "Especially considering that you're already out of time."

Andrew looked up and saw the change up above. A murky, crimson and gold melding of color had overtaken the night sky. The inferno was nearing its release.

It was four against six, but the Kruna still found themselves on the losing end of things. Tamara, Naraka, Machula, and Maki were all formidable opponents to have to face. Every blast the Kruna fired, the Sweeps had an effective counter for. Every technique the Kruna used, the Sweeps were able to evade and avoid. Judging by the

change in the color of the sky, the inferno was close to being cast. The Kruna could not tell for sure because the gigantic Thwomp prevented anyone from seeing over its height. The Thwomp must have towered dozens of stories into the air.

Tamara would have laid out another chain lightning attack had Marut not used his ninjato as a lightning rod to catch the energy. Marut then whipped around to release the lightning upon the Thwomp, but the maneuver did nothing to remove it from its position. The Thwomp absorbed the lightning as if it were made out of rubber.

"This is ridiculous!" yelled Bowser. "We don't have time for you Black Mages!"

"You don't have any time at all," said Tamara.

"That's too bad!" Athelstan hollered. "I'm making time!" He tapped into his Alkemei Odina to double his strength, then charged at the Thwomp to deliver a monstrous kick with his Boot Club Additions. The force ruptured the colossal Thwomp and shattered it into countless chunks, but it was all for not. Once sight was restored to King Boo and Solovar, flames began erupting from their conjuring pot and shooting up into the sky. The Kruna were just a little too late. The hellfire had been freed.

Chapter XXV

Into the Fire :

Having left Birabuto Kingdom boundaries with her orange stomach chakra, Daisy had made an arc around the northwest of Castle Town en route eastbound towards the Chai Kingdom. Already, she had to take down several Guardians that seemed to become tougher and tougher to avoid with each chakra she collected. Due to the Silent Realm not being a physical world, she didn't have to worry about fatigue, but combating the Guardians without elemental abilities proved to be time-consuming. The last time she heard Geno's voice, he had said she had four hours remaining, and that was a while ago. With three chakras collected, she still needed the other four chakras with likely only about three hours to go.

After getting used to my Betedaimon body, this normal form feels so foreign, she thought as she ran. *And then if I* – when *I finish this trial, I'm going to wake up back in my Betedaimon body, just to go and get myself permanently returned back to normal. I have to readjust to one just to switch to the other. I didn't have that issue when switching from normal to Nova Form...*

Daisy's eyes went wide, her pace slowing but not stopping. *Maybe that transition from normal to Betedaimon and back is a part of the process of mastering the Nova Form! Just like when switching from normal to Nova, I have to be able to switch from normal to Betedaimon without a refractory period! It should be just as smooth as going into Nova! That way, when I'm finally done with the Betedaimon, changing to Nova will be even easier than before, and that'll be where a lot of the power and energy wasted with the transformation will be saved!*

Suddenly, she felt a claw slash at her back and strip away her root chakra. As she rebounded out of the hit, she saw a Guardian staring her down and her red chakra resting in its palm. She dealt a Flurry Punch that chained into a Smash Punch with her other hand in a furious retaliation, knocking free the root chakra for her to reclaim.

The Guardian tried to strike back with another clawed swing, but missed and was met with a forceful kick to the head. A double-palm strike to its torso from the Kruna of Earth knocked it down for good. She went to go retrieve her root chakra and then resumed her sprint for the Chai Kingdom boundary, haste apparent.

This is ridiculous, Daisy thought. *With three chakras claimed and less than four hours remaining to get the others, I can't afford to waste any more time like this! I am going to run right through any Guardian that wants to try and get in my way again, no holding back!*

The chakras of the solar plexus, throat, forehead, and crown awaited somewhere, and Daisy had to find them fast. Time was running out for her.

Time had already ran out for the Kruna.

The hellfire spread out into the sky above, prompting King Boo and Solovar to bolt down to the ground to avoid getting singed. Flames rained down on the immediate vicinity and forced everyone, Kruna, Sweep, and Boo alike, to back off and move away. The few bystanders that hung around to view the scene fled the moment they saw the intense nature of the raging fire. Neva tried to get off a shot on the conjuring pot with her crossbow, only for the wall of fire to block any way of reaching it.

"You're wasting your time, little girl," said Tamara. "There's *been* nothing you can do to stop it!"

"And since our work is done here, we're leaving!" added Maki.

King Boo ripped open a portal for escape. The Black Mages all ran for the portal and passed through, not even giving so much as a second look at the results of their combined efforts. King Boo looked like he wanted to say something before he left and closed the portal behind him, but he seemed like he wanted to ensure he got away from the fire as soon as possible. That left Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, and Neva alone to try and halt the progression of the inferno. The elemental wielders Neva had called

were scattered throughout the city, and it looked like they were going to get some action. Marut watched the hellfire spread and realized it moved just as quick as it did in the vision Marissa showed him.

"This is it, everyone!" Warra shouted over the crackling and burning of buildings.

"Where is Andrew?" Ramona asked.

"We can't worry about him!" Bowser yelled. "He's grown; he can watch over himself!"

The hellfire forced the Kruna into a continuous backwards stagger as Bowser did all he could to quell the flames and as Warra did all he could to douse them. The remains of the Thwomp were swallowed, and it only took moments for Chai City Town Center to be completely engulfed. Neva let frost flow from her crossbow to smother the wall of fire from overhead, and Marut tried blowing the flames into each other. Ramona tried canceling out the energy of the fires with light beams, and Athelstan, not able to come up with anything else to do, picked up nearby cars and karts and hurled them in tight spirals to try and disrupt the inferno. Despite their combined efforts, the fire continued spreading and they found themselves backpedaling faster in an attempt to create some sort of space.

"Are we having any sort of noticeable effect on this fire?" shouted Bowser. "It looks like we're doing next-to-nothing!"

"What kind of horrible fire is this?" Ramona wondered aloud. "This is not normal!"

"Let me go!" Andrew demanded.

"I'm sorry; what was that?" Marissa asked.

"Either let me go around you, or I'm forcing my way through you!" the Kruna growled.

"And what do you hope to accomplish by doing that? You think you're just gonna waltz up to the flames and you and your weak friends are gonna throw your paltry little elemental blasts and everything is going to be okay? I don't think so."

Andrew clenched his teeth in frustration. "It's better than not doing anything-"

Marissa just shook her head. "Instead of running like Geno would-"

"Geno wouldn't run!"

"Instead of running *like Geno would* ," Marissa repeated. "You're going to try and put out an immortal hellfire? Now, suppose you all succumb to the inferno? Then what? You know what. It will be the same thing we just saw, only in place of the one you called 'Elkon,' it'll be me, and I intend on doing things much more ambitious than wiping the planet clean." She started cackling with malice. "Does the thought of self-preservation suddenly seem more appealing? That's pretty much all Geno can hope to do-"

"Why do you keep bringing up Geno?" Andrew asked.

"Because that's all he's been concerned with!" snapped Marissa. "He's been running because he knows he can't beat me. Sure, every once in a while he'll *act* like he has a shot at taking me down, but he knows that the moment he starts to falter, he's going to bail. He *has* to if he wants to survive. He doesn't share the immortality that I do. He's lived a very long time, no doubt, but he's vulnerable and he won't last forever. He knows that, but he doesn't know that I can see right through him, and I don't need a Malocchio Eye to come to that conclusion."

Andrew flared an orb of shadow in his left hand. "I've heard enough! Let me through so I can help my friends."

"Oh please," Marissa said, flicking her hand. "I could probably help you disband the fire; more than your friends can anyways. These kinds of things are my *speciality* , but you'll have to do *exactly* as I say."

"Give me one good reason why you should be trusted."

"I'm the one that foresaw the fire, wasn't I? I delivered the message to alert you all so you wouldn't come here after the inferno had already spread. Do you want to waste time trying to decide whether I should be trusted, or not?"

Andrew sighed, dispelling his dark energy. "Okay, fine. What do you need me to do?"

Marissa took off her hat and made a wide-arcing motion with it in the air. Her Power Vase appeared overhead and drifted to a soft landing on the ground.

"Just one thing," said Marissa. "Donate all of your available energy into this Power Vase."

In the Silent Realm, Daisy stood at the top of a steep hill overlooking the Chai Kingdom. Just before she had arrived at Chai Kingdom boundaries, she found her purple-indigo forehead chakra in the outskirts of some nearby bamboo forests, and now only needed three more chakras. She gazed at the landscape, trying to spot any signs or clues as to where any of the remaining chakras could be. What she saw confused her and made no sense. She remembered Chai City being in the direction where she was looking, but she saw warped smoldering and buildings crumbling and fading away.

What's all that about? she wondered. *Why does it look like Chai City is disappearing?*

Daisy stood there, staring at the sight of the vanishing city. It was strange to her that it seemed to be disappearing from the inside out, emanating from the center of the city and outwards. She couldn't dwell on it for long, for she only had so much time.

That's so strange, she thought. *I was born not too far from there – like literally a couple miles from Chai City. It's been built up a lot since the last time I saw it, but why does it look like it's on fire? There's no fire in Silent Realms, are there? I guess this means there*

aren't any chakras over there?

Chai City looked like it was slowly shrinking before Daisy's eyes. She cocked an eyebrow, confused by the interesting sight. From what she saw in the Silent Realm, there was no apparent cause for Chai City's mounting destruction.

I guess there aren't any there, she decided. *Probably not in the Chai Kingdom at all; the deepest into Chai Kingdom I've been since returning to Sarasaland was in The Deep Wood at Marissa's Lair, and I doubt there'd be one there. But I do know of a place where there might be one...*

Some of the recruited fire and water wielders had made their way to the Kruna and went to work trying to put a cease to the hellfire, but all they managed to do was slow down its progression. Buildings continued to crumble and burn. The sound of crackling, explosions, and screams flooded the air. No doubt that there were people trapped within the numerous buildings now consumed in fiery death, just as there were many more unknowingly awaiting their doom in the path of the ever-expanding inferno.

"We're sorry we couldn't alarm everyone!" one of the fire wielders said.

"AHHHHH!" a voice called out in agony. The outline of a stout figure cut through the wall of flames and sprinted his way towards the Kruna and the gathered fire and water wielders of Sarasaland.

And then it happened. Wario ran past everyone, flailing his arms and screaming, "AHHH-WAWAWA-WAWA-WAWA! MY BUTT'S ON FIRE!"

"I got it," said Warra. He sent a swift blast of water at Wario's backside, effectively saving the yellow-suited man from immolation.

"Well, at least we put out that!" Athelstan cheered.

"Personally, I would've just left it on him," said Bowser.

"Oh, now is not the time, Bowser!" Neva yelled. "This fire is too voracious!"

"Thanks there, man in blue!" Wario said. He turned to Bowser, asking, "What are you doing here?"

"What are YOU doing here?!" Bowser snapped back.

"We had a gaming conference at the Chai City Concert Hall!" Wario replied.

"Yeah, you picked the best time for that," said Neva.

"How was I supposed to know that this would all happen?" asked Wario. "All I knew was that this conference was supposed to be a revenue booster and raise hype for 'Wario Ware: Island Frenzy!' But now, it's all gone up in flames! I'm gonna think long and hard about giving Sarasaland a bad review on next week's news feed!"

"Gee, that's so pressing!" exclaimed Bowser.

"It is!" Wario replied, not noticing the koopa's sarcasm. "Can you imagine the coinage that I missed out on because of this stupid fire? The confidence of my customers and fans must be so shaken now! They're gonna remember this conference not for the game demos, but for the fire that burnt down the game demos! It'll be like DashCon all over again! You want a convention? Nope! Sorry! It burnt down! So did the ball pit! And are you guys making this fire worse or are you actually trying to put it out?"

"What do you think we're trying to do, Wario?" Bowser said. "If I have to say it, you don't know your ass from a hole in the ground – just get outta here man! While you still can!"

"And get a new pair of pants," Athelstan added. "They've burnt a little more than you would've liked!"

Wario jumped in shock and held the holed back of his pants. "You don't gotta tell me twice! I'll leave you guys to it! You all look like you know what you're doing!"

As Wario bolted down the street and away from the flames, Warra

muttered to himself, "I sure hope we know what we're doing."

Andrew held out his hands and let his elemental energy flow into the Power Vase. He was concerned that he was going to break the vase, but it sucked up his power like a magnetized sponge. Marissa watched with a blank expression and plenty of patience. When the Kruna of Shadow ran out of power, Marissa capped the Power Vase and stuffed it under her armpit.

"Thank you, sweetie," said Marissa.

"Don't call me that," Andrew grumbled.

"I was just trying to be nice is all," replied Marissa, her voice eerily quiet. "I can't be nice?"

Andrew facepalmed himself. "Okay, so what's going to happen now?"

Marissa pulled out her Mystic Broom and let it hover in front of her. "Hop on. And hold on tight!"

As Marissa sat down on the broom, Andrew took a seat right behind her. The broom lifted the two up into the air. They hovered out of the alley and above the many buildings of the city until they reached a point high above the entire metropolis.

The sight was a horrific one, to say the absolute least. From overhead, the hellfire billowed and consumed much of the inner part of Chai City. All around the perimeter of the flames, Andrew could see bursts of water being thrown at the fire. Along with help from Chai City firefighters, the efforts of the many fire and water wielders that Neva had gathered seemed to be eliciting some sort of effect on the inferno, but it did not appear to be enough. Sirens, screams, and general chaos echoed into the atmosphere. The fire was still spreading and growing larger, forcing everyone down on the ground back.

Marut quivered as he clutched his blade, his legs turning to jello as the Kruna and their help were all forced further and further back form the center of Chai City. Screams continued to fill the sky of people who either never got the warning or were too stubborn to leave. Already, two more of the water wielders that were with them had got caught in the inferno and were burnt alive. He looked at all his teammates as they did all they could against the hellfire, only to achieve very limited success. To make things worse, everyone was losing energy fast. The inferno only continued to expand and grow stronger.

Adrenaline swelling within, Marut started to become short of breath. Death was staring at them all and pulling its way closer. The toll it was racking up did not stop climbing. Images of Marissa's vision depicting all of the Kruna being burned alive haunted Marut. His eyes began streaming tears as fear for his life took over. He wanted to run so badly, but they couldn't. They had to try their best to stop the hellfire, but if they did too much, they would all perish.

"W-Why now..." Marut sputtered. "Why this? What is this? It doesn't fit the rules! We're either fulfilling our duty as Kruna by staying here to fight this fire and die, or we willfully abandon an entire city! Either way, we lose – how can that be right?!"

The hellfire looked just as it did in Marissa's vision. It looked as if it was melded with souls of the tormented and fiends unknown by mortals. The more he stared at the fire, the more that eyes and mouths became discernible.

"This isn't how it's supposed to work!" Marut cried. "The good guys are supposed to win in times like this! Come up with a well-thought out plan! Overcome the odds and unlock a new power in the nick of time to save the day! Something!"

Warra took several leaps back and tried to pull together his remaining energy to unleash a Hydrocannon, but upon firing off the pressurized water, he soon realized that it would not be enough to overcome the insurmountable size of the flames. Angered, Bowser made several jumps backwards as well and put out a Tavado blast, only for his fiery torpedos to be burnt themselves by the unreal inferno. Neva's Novado did not have much more success either.

"So what now?!" Marut screamed. "After all we've been through, we're all just going to die?!"

Athelstan channeled into his Alkemei Odina, jamming his foot into the ground to kick up the entirety of the street in front of them. The ridge created did manage to halt the progression of the inferno for a few brief moments, but it didn't last. Before long, the flames climbed over and resumed chasing the coalition of elemental wielders.

"We're all good aren't we?" Marut asked, tears in free flow. "Why is this happening? We're supposed to come through in times like this... all of us..."

"It's too much!" one of the fire wielders hollered. "Fallback! Bail out!"

"You damn well better not!" Neva screamed.

"We have to!" yelled one of the water wielders. "There's nothing we can do! We've tried everything!"

"We gotta GO!" another fire wielder screamed.

All of the assisting elemental wielders subdued their energies and removed their focus from the hellfire. They turned and fled down the street with urgency. Whatever shame they developed from their decision, they hid, and they did not look back, nor did they think to wait for Neva and the Kruna. With the drop off in resistance, the inferno resumed expanding at its previous pace.

"Even they gave up?" Bowser yelled. "This is their nation! Not ours!"

"If we don't do something quick, we're all gonna fry!" screamed Ramona.

"I'm out of energy, you guys!" exclaimed Warra.

"Don't you all get it?" snapped Marut. "We all got to this point to win, not to lose! We're not supposed to lose situations like these! We're not supposed to die!"

Athelstan once more put his Pendant of Strength to use and kicked into the street. With each leap backwards, he forced punishing kicks

into the ground to set up a series of wedges and ridges to delay the flames, but he too appeared to be running low on power. Soon, he didn't have enough energy to work his Alkemei Odina.

"I don't know... what we can do here, guys," said Athelstan. "There's no telling how many people have been caught in there already. If we don't turn tail and get out of here now, we're going to end up like them!"

"No!" screamed Marut. "NOT LIKE THIS!" A waterfall of tears streaming from his eyes, he choked the grip of his ninjato with all his strength. "What the hell could be the reason for this madness?!" Lightning began to form around his tool. In all the instances before, the lightning would jump from his ninjato to a target, but this time, it constrained itself to the blade. This development caught the attention of all his teammates around him.

"What did we do to deserve this?" Marut cried. The lightning around his ninjato continued to intensify, yet remained contained to his blade despite the building density in power.

"What's this?!" Bowser thought aloud. "This is a new one!"

"Marut!" Warra called out. "Marut!"

"Answer when you're being talked to!" yelled Bowser.

"I don't wanna die!" Marut screamed. "Nobody dies!" He kept urging all of his available energy into the lightning, forcing out everything he had. "I just wanna make it all go away! C'mon! C'MON!" He did not stop charging his ninjato until all his power was locked tight around his blade, unaware that he was executing a fully-powered Lightning Blade technique.

The Kruna and Neva all stared at their air teammate in awe of what he had produced. Marut thrust his Cyclone Ninjato to the sky. The lightning finally leapt out and branched up into the heavens and brought a wicked downdraft that stopped the progression of the inferno. The power of the lightning contorted the sky above, drawing clouds and evoking even more lightning around them. Thunder boomed and split the air as water squeezed out of the gathering

clouds to become rainfall.

"Everyone – GET BEHIND HIM!" Warra shouted. "He's not thinking!"

Marut's teammates got out of his line of sight as he brought down his ninjato and made a sweeping horizontal swing, unleashing a swath of lightning that burst through a massive chunk of the hellfire. The moment he let the energy loose, he collapsed and passed out. For as grand as his move was, it only succeeded in pushing back the inferno. And although it pushed the fire back a considerable distance, it still raged on from other directions and in other parts of the city. Even the thunderstorm that formed overhead could not overcome the magnitude and might of the hellfire. The sides of the inferno closed in to cover up the massive gap formed by Marut's technique.

After witnessing what had just happened, the Kruna all resigned to the fact that the hellfire was far too much for any of them to overcome. Judging by how barren the city was the further out they moved from the center, those that didn't get caught up in the inferno had already evacuated the city. With that in mind, the Kruna made the decision to fall back. Neva bolted forward and picked up Marut and his ninjato before the flames got to him and took off to escape down the street with the rest of the team.

"Why are we still hovering up here?" asked Andrew. "Why aren't we doing anything to stop the fire? I'm pretty sure this thunderstorm isn't gonna cut it!"

Marissa didn't reply. She stared at the monstrous inferno, her arms crossed and a sly smile stuck to her face. It was as if she paid no attention to the inferno below.

"Marissa!" Andrew grunted. "We've been up here for quite a while now, and you haven't done anything!"

"I'm sorry," Marissa replied. "I was thinking about working on a currency for Goombas and Rexes to use. Does my hair smell nice?"

"What does any of that have to do with any of this? And... yes, it does smell nice... but, again! What does that got to do with what's going on down below?"

Marissa began chuckling. "Exactly."

Suddenly, Lord Arkana turned around and grabbed Andrew by the shirt. She pulled him up off the broom and held him out so that he dangled from her hand in the air. Her smile evolved into a nasty grin.

"I hope you've learned your lesson, Kruna," said Marissa. "Don't trust a demon witch."

Marissa pulled back and threw the shadow wielder at the heart of the wall of fire down below. She then yanked up on her broom and soared off in the direction of her mansion, laughing in a demonic baritone. Because of her hasty departure, she did not see the wave of cosmic light soar through the air above Chai City that saved Andrew from certain death.

"We're not gonna make it!" Ramona screamed.

The hellfire had somehow accelerated its speed of expansion, as if Marut's Lightning Blade had angered the flames themselves. The inferno now seemed hellbent on not only consuming all of Chai City but the Kruna as well. They ran as fast as they could, but the hellfire was gaining on them. The fires seemed to be forming "arms" to try and wrangle in the fleeing elemental wielders. Doom had been a possibility all night, but it had now become imminent.

Just as Neva was about to get singed, the same wave of cosmic light that grabbed Andrew dove down to snatch her and the rest of the Kruna. The cosmic light then soared off into the sky for a nearby cliff face a safe distance away. At the instant the cosmic light escaped, the hellfire's power intensified in rage and tripled both its rate of spread and its temperature of burn. The inferno's flames bounced around with instability, enlarging its scope to consume all of Chai City.

Chapter XXVI

Mantle of Kruna :

Daisy dashed through the Silent Realm, southbound from the Chai Kingdom through Sarasa Field. She kept her eyes not on the path but on the forestry, and when she found the landmarks she was looking for, she abandoned the path altogether. Through the trees and underbrush she roamed until she came to a familiar cave. She entered and trekked deep within, thinking back to earlier in the day when the Monty Moles lead her through in the physical world.

When she found the same area in the cave where the Monty Moles had dug down underground, she didn't see any chakra. She had thought of the possibility that it could be somewhere in that Monty Mole civilization, but she was unsure of how she was supposed to get there. The Monties guided her there the last time, and she had her elemental abilities helping her to traverse through the packed in dirt and soil. Trying to dig all the way through would take hours – hours that she didn't have, and even then, she would not be able to get very far. Since she was in an immaterial version of her normal form, not her Betedaimon form, and would be for as long as she was going to be in the Silent Realm, she didn't even have her naturally-formed pseudo-claws to help her dig.

But Geno said that the chakras wouldn't be anywhere I couldn't get to on my own, she thought. *Which means that maybe it's not exactly through here, but...*

She turned and dashed out of the cave, then took off on the paths of Sarasa Field once again to curve around the southeastern portion of the Castle Town boundaries. Again, she veered off into the trees, mindful to avoid disturbing any Guardians, and scanned through the area. With a little effort, she found the cave that the Monty Moles had lead her out from, dashed in, and wall jumped down the large vertical tunnel drop to get to the underground Monty Mole community. Towards the center, she saw her blue throat chakra. She made a run for the hovering orb, but snatching it triggered a

trap. Eight guardians appeared; two from within the ground, two from above, and four spread within the small town.

There were too many of them for Daisy to dispatch without burning up a considerable chunk of time, and the potential for having to wrestle over her chakras with them would stall her even longer, so she made a break for the exit from which she came. The Guardians chased in hot pursuit, making clawed swings at every opportunity they had, though all attacks missed. Daisy was too fast for them, and the moment she reached the vertical tunnel again, she took to the walls and wall jumped her way up. The Guardians could not do anything to follow. They lacked the agility and coordination, so they remained stuck at the bottom. Once Daisy got to the top, she peered down and saw the Guardians not doing anything but running into the walls and each other despite not actually making any locomotor progress.

I didn't think I would see wallbonking in real life, Daisy thought. *But whatever. I have retrieved five of my chakras, so-*

"Less than two hours remain, Kruna Daisy," Geno's voice echoed.

"Damn," Daisy muttered. "Just when I think I have enough time, I don't." She bolted through the cave and back outside, searching for the paths of Sarasa Field. She knew that there was one place she hadn't been yet, a place she had been putting off traversing through. But now she had no choice. *I have to go through there,* she thought. *I know that the final two chakras are somewhere there. It's the only place that I haven't checked...*

The hellfire was over. Chai City was no more.

Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Neva, Ramona, and Andrew all stood on a cliff overlooking the city. Neva had Marut over her shoulder, the Kruna of Air barely awake. The elemental wielders stared at where Chai City used to be, the group as a whole confused, dejected, but probably most of all, defeated. None of them were even sure how they managed to get away. All they knew was that a cosmic light had carried them to safety, and that if not for that light, they would

be a part of the unsettling scene down below.

The localized thunderstorm dropped rain on the charred, ashy remains of Chai City. The once proud metropolis had been burnt to a crisp, including the ground itself. In some areas, large gashes in the land had been burnt through. There was no telling how deep the drops within were, just as there was no telling how many of the residents got caught in the fire.

"Even with our influence, this happened," murmured Warra. "Are we really that ineffective?"

"Don't get discouraged so easily, Kruna," a familiar voice called out.

The wave of cosmic light that brought all of the elemental wielders to the cliff shot down in front of them and dissipated, revealing Rosalina, Lubba, and Polari. Athelstan introduced Lubba and Polari to the group, having been the only one of the Kruna aside from Bowser that had previously seen them up to that point. The three cosmic beings affirmed that they had combined their powers in order to save the elemental wielders from certain immolation.

"And we are very grateful for it," said Ramona. "Very!"

"We may as well have burnt up if that's all we're good for!" Andrew growled, pointing at where Chai City used to stand.

"Where did you even run off to?" asked Bowser. "Did you get lost?"

"I went to go help someone I thought was in trouble," Andrew answered. "Turned out it was a trap by Marissa! She cornered me, tricked me into giving her all of my energy, then threw me at the fire to die! I was better off just getting thrown into that inferno just for the simple fact that I didn't do a damn thing!"

"Don't torture yourself," said Rosalina. "The moment a fire of that nature is released, all one can do is run. There's a reason those fires are contained in Limbo and not in existence in any other realm. Those flames have burnt on since the creation of our universe. Not only are they immortal, but they are an immoral weapon to wield. Tales and legends, myths and fables; all speak of terrible times

coming when Limbo's flames pour down onto the Earth's surface. Hopefully, this instance doesn't correlate with said oral traditions. If I had kept an eye on you all as I intended to, I would have told you beforehand to avoid the hellfire at all costs if it was ever released, but Mario and Luigi have been in quite the predicament themselves, so we've been working with them as of late." Her eyes gravitated towards the pendant around Athelstan's neck. "I see you had to use the Alkemei Odina."

"I did," the Kruna of Stone replied. "Don't worry though; I didn't mention anything regarding what we discussed, Grand Elder."

"Good," Rosalina replied. "The situation here in Sarasaland is far too important to be distracted from. As a fellow archivist, I knew you would be the right person to trust with valuable information."

"That reminds me, Grand Elder," said Athelstan. "Kokoro's here in Sarasaland, and he's got the Master Pendant! We ran into him earlier today before he laid down a fatal attack on Daisy! Things just keep going from bad to worse here!"

Rosalina frowned. "Not good. Not at all. That Alkemei must have somehow made its way back to this dimension-"

"You two better start saying something!" Bowser yelled. "What's all this talk about those pendants?"

"Long story short; there's a ton of really cool ones and one really bad one!" Athelstan replied. "Kokoro's got the bad one!"

"Listen, all of you," Rosalina asserted. "Do not engage with Kokoro if you do not have to. If there is ever a scenario where you must confront him, at least one of you – it doesn't matter who – must leave the scene, and the rest must do what they can to strip the Master Pendant from him."

"Okay," Bowser grumbled. "Now how about telling us why?!"

"Rosalina, I have to be honest," said Athelstan. "I don't like keeping my teammates in the dark like this. We're all Kruna, so we all should deserve to know, not just me! I would never have gotten this far

without them, and by the same token, if it weren't for what I accomplished with them, you would not have disclosed any of that info with me! And if you ask me, this information will prove vital to our victory here in Sarasaland, especially in the case of one of our main opponents here! I insist that you put the same trust in my friends here that you put in me and tell them all that you told me! I've held my tongue long enough! If you don't say anything, then I will! We've already had an entire city burnt down because we weren't prepared, so please, help us in not making that same mistake again!"

"Especially since we're the only team of Kruna currently in existence!" added Andrew. "The demon witch – the *immortal* demon witch – let me in on that! So if we screw up, then what? Are you just going to put together a new team of Kruna? What constitutes being a 'guardian of the elements' anyways?"

"Or did you just choose the wrong ones for the job?" asked Marut, gaining consciousness but self-doubt filling his voice. Neva let him down to stand on his own. "We are the wrong ones for the job, aren't we? Real Kruna wouldn't've let Chai City get leveled like that! What are we?"

"You all have to calm down," Rosalina urged. She sensed the growing lack of confidence and the questioning of their roles, the last things the world needed. She wondered if it was a result of Daisy's absence from the group, but something told her that even the presence of the Kruna of Earth would not have helped the situation that much, if at all. Not this time, at least.

"These are trying times indeed for all of us," said Rosalina. "I recruited you all as Kruna, but it was not by circumstance, convenience, or any personal matter or influence. I read the stars, I listened to the cosmos, and they told me well before you all came together that only one team of elemental wielders was capable of upholding the Mantle of Kruna in our current period of time. Polari and Lubba can both argue about where you stand compared to teams of Kruna in the past, or even against other, more powerful beings and elemental wielders, but they both can say with certainty that I did not misread the stars. Deep down, you all must know and acknowledge this within yourselves!"

"There's a saying that runs through history," stated Polari. "When someone with the capacity to be a future Kruna is born, they have something special about them that makes them subconsciously aware of their potential for greatness. Why doubt yourselves when you know you don't want to?"

"Please, don't be discouraged," Rosalina said. "Yes, Chai City has been burnt down, but it can be rebuilt! Many lives have been lost that can not be replaced, but let this serve as motivation and as a reality check – for you are part of something much larger than you may have realized before tonight. You may not want to acknowledge it now, but even though you've failed in preventing this catastrophe, you have succeeded in preventing many more that would have occurred and ravaged civilization had you never answered destiny's call! And there's more to come, Kruna! You are all destined! You must all live up to your titles! Prove you are worthy and don't fail or abandon your duties!"

Athelstan's tone was stern when he replied, "Then our duties require I ask that all of us know of the Alkemei, Osiris, and the Shadow Queen."

Rosalina exchanged looks with Polari and Lubba. Although not right away, the two Lumas nodded. The Elder of the Cosmos did take note of Polari and Lubba's hesitation, but they made it clear that the decision was hers to make.

"Alright," said Rosalina. "I'll allow it, Kruna of Stone. I trust you will all listen carefully now, for we do not have the time for me to repeat myself..."

Rosalina, Polari, and Lubba explained everything to the Kruna and Neva and even expanded to tell of things Athelstan did not previously hear during his stay at the Comet Observatory. The Shadow Queen, the four legendary heroes that sealed her away, the various Alkemei forged and created, Osiris the Demon God and his attempts to free the Shadow Queen after the ensuing Armageddon, the four legendary heroes from before combining with four more to become the first team of Kruna – the Kruna Genesis – and their efforts to lock away Osiris within the Master Pendant. The elemental wielders listened to the lore of ages past with attentiveness, intrigue,

wonder, and amazement.

"We've done our best to try and subdue the mention of both the Shadow Queen and Osiris," said Polari. "We felt the modern era should try to erase their names from memory, but we only would've been putting you in danger and setting up your demise by keeping this knowledge away from you, and for that, we apologize greatly."

"As Kruna, we must trust that you will make wise decisions with the information we've given you," stated Lubba.

"Unfortunately, we can't stay here any longer," Rosalina said. "We're assisting Mario and Luigi with a quest of theirs that requires our immediate attention. If we had not sensed the presence of Limbo's hellfire, we would not have traveled out here in the first place. I'm sorry for the abrupt leave, but we did stay longer than we intended. Relay all this to Daisy the next chance you get. I'm sure things in Sarasaland here are being tended to with capable hands."

After a moment of silence for all those who died in the hellfire, Rosalina, Polari, and Lubba all disappeared in a small burst of light, leaving the Kruna and Neva by themselves. They took a few moments to let all that they heard from the cosmic beings soak in. Although the information was weighted and very substantial, they didn't seem to be overwhelmed by it.

"It changes nothing," said Andrew. "We've got far too much to have to deal with here to be concerned or distracted by some ancient, sealed away beings, right everyone?"

"Exactly," Bowser agreed. "As long as both the Shadow Queen and Osiris stay sealed away, then they're non-issues. Besides, judging by what we've heard of Marissa, she'll be equally as bad as they were once the Blood Moon arrives, if not worse. But now that we've learned what happened to the Shadow Queen and Osiris – both immortal beings – we have a method of beating Marissa."

Marut perked up in confusion. "We do?"

Bowser nodded. "We should see if Daisy's passed her Silent Realm trial yet before we make any other decisions on where to go from

here."

Neva took out the two remaining Ultra Mushrooms from her item pouch and handed them to Ramona and Andrew. "Eat these and take us back to the sanctuary," the ice wielder said, her voice unsteady. "And be quick about it. I don't want to look at that massive pile of char and ash down there anymore. Please."

Daisy burst through the southern entrance of Castle Town, unsure of where to look for the remaining chakras, but it didn't seem to matter. She almost "knew" where she had to go to find them, definite and unwavering in her movements. She could feel herself gravitating towards two distinct areas, as if the chakras were pulling her to them. Even so, she had to be careful, for Castle Town was infested with Guardians compared to all the other locations she had checked.

She rounded a corner and ran right into a Guardian, but she would not allow herself to be held up any longer. She dished out a handful of efficient blows to put the Guardian down in mere seconds so she could progress closer to her two goals. As she dashed through the Castle Town streets, she dealt with more Guardians, but she was much better about not letting them lay down a hit on her. She maintained possession of her five chakras and knocked out the several Guardians that challenged her, wasting no time with her moves.

Castle Town in the Silent Realm looked so peaceful. The scenery made Daisy think back to her life as a kid, and how crisp and golden the city used to be. Present day Castle Town was a shell of its former self, but the Silent Realm version of the city seemed to restore some of its lost charm and significance. For as much as she had to go through as a kid, Daisy acknowledged that she did feel a sense of longing for the way Sarasaland used to be when she was a kid. If only her father hadn't been the way he was, then maybe she would have never left Sarasaland, and she definitely would not have been handed over to Tatanga during that event.

I can think about what-ifs all I want, she thought, turning another corner. *But I'm here now, and I wouldn't change a thing about the*

history that has happened. I have the future to make a difference in!

She worked her way through to the inner portions of Castle Town, taking down several more Guardians with swift and forceful strikes. Now that time was running short and the pressure to complete the trial was amplified, Daisy could feel her energy and decisiveness both increase. She made every move, turn, attack, cut, and jump matter to run the roads and take down the Guardians in her way in prompt, no-nonsense fashion.

After dashing around the streets of the city, she finally arrived at one of two destinations. The white crown chakra awaited for her at the center of an old training arena. It was the arena that her and Master Terran used to use a decade ago back when he was training her. It had definitely aged, though it was more difficult to tell in the Silent Realm. She looked at the walls and the trees and the ornamental, floral designs of the area as a whole, memories flooding back to her and invigorating her. She didn't understand why, but it all filled her with energy and power to urge her onwards. She retrieved her crown chakra and made a full-speed dash for the Central Castle. It was not much more than a half-mile or so from the training arena.

Daisy ran with intent and purpose, bulldozing through the front doors of the Central Castle without a hitch in her momentum. She cut through the halls within, passing by several rooms, the kitchen, the common armory, and more. Interestingly enough, no Guardians existed within. She paid it no mind, for she devoted all her focus to the one room she knew she had to see. Up the stairs she went, making full use of her memory of the building's layout. She made it up to the fourth floor and sliced around the perimeter hallway to reach a certain closed door. After a deep breath, she turned the knob and walked inside.

The yellow solar plexus chakra awaited within, hovering above Daisy's old bed. She took the final chakra and absorbed it into her essence, but instead of immediately taking off for the septagram back at Geno's Sanctuary, she found herself gazing at her old walls, old dressers, and even her old floor and carpet. Because of the nature of the Silent Realm, she was unable to discern whether or not any of her stuff from the past was still there. Everything looked blank and generic as a result of the silvery-black-teal mixture of color that

the realm overlaid upon anything that wasn't a part of her.

She pulled apart the curtains of one of her windows to get a view of the eastern Castle Town landscape. The Silent Realm made it all look so ethereal and surreal. She thought back to the way the city looked when she used to peer out the window as a kid. The image of Castle Town several years ago gave her a special mystique that could not be replicated by the Silent Realm. *How unreal to think that time can make the past feel so... golden,* she mused.

"You have less than one hour, Daisy," Geno's voice echoed. "If you do not make it back to the septagram at the sanctuary, your physical body will start to breakdown and decay..."

An idea formed in her mind, but she knew she could not address it until she made it back to the starting point of the trial. With some reluctance, she withdrew from her old room, closed the door, and proceeded to exit the Central Castle.

Her run back through Castle Town was a surprising one. Nearly all the Guardians that were scattered throughout the city before had vanished. Those that remained were sparse and easy to avoid. A few times on the run for the city's boundaries, Daisy caught herself looking back at the Central Castle.

I'm going to, she thought. *I will have to, Betedaimon or not...*

Chapter XXVII

Ghosts of the Past :

"Thirty minutes," Geno's voice echoed in the Silent Realm. "The timing is approximate, not exact, Kruna Daisy. Wherever you are, hurry."

Daisy ran out of Castle Town and proceeded eastward back to Geno's Sanctuary. She had to kick it into high gear to ensure she made a timely return to the septagram. Unfortunately for her, she became reckless. She zipped through Sarasa Field with little to no regard for any Guardians that were perched in wait along the way. When she looked back, nine Guardians were on her tail.

Knowing that she couldn't let any of the Guardians stalk her all the way back to the sanctuary, Daisy stopped in her tracks to confront them. With clutch strikes and heavy blows, she took down the Guardians one by one and resumed her mad dash to the Muda Mountains. However, the conflict ate up a large chunk of her remaining time.

"Twelve minutes, Sarasa," she heard Geno say.

She still had a little ways to go, but she had plenty of speed in reserve. She decided it would be better to waste a few seconds with evasive steps rather than causing a raucous and having to waste whole minutes fighting Guardians. Even though there were fewer waiting around this time, they still presented a challenge to have to overcome and get past.

Since her trip back inside of the Central Castle, images and flashbacks of her life before leaving Sarasaland kept running through her mind. In spite of how bad things were for her back then, Daisy was feeling nostalgic. She had little reason to be. Her parents were bad to her, her earth master was banished from Sarasaland, everyone in the nation took on a hatred for her as the years had passed and as she had gotten older, and she remembered all too well that whether it was her fault or not, the citizens were not happy

at all about the prospect of her being in line to be Sarasaland's next ruler. *Even so, I grew up there,* she thought. *They kept me alive and I'm pretty damn satisfied with how I turned out. It's another set of memories to look back at and see how far I've come...whenever I feel down, lost, or alone. The moment I leave the Silent Realm and return to the physical world, there's something I definitely need to accomplish before anything else.*

"Two minutes," Geno said. "Your body will start breaking down in a matter of moments if you do not return to the septagram."

The tunnel that led under the Muda Mountains and into Geno's Sanctuary was straight ahead. Wasting no more time but using all her speed, Daisy bolted for the tunnel and went straight through to the other side. The glowing septagram from earlier awaited.

There it is! Daisy yelled in thought. She made a break for the emblem resting on the ground right where her actual body was in the physical world.

The moment her foot crossed the septagram's boundaries, all seven chakras shined their respective colors from their respective origins. Together, the chakras emitted an audible hum in time with their slow pulsations. Daisy walked into the center of the septagram and pulled back to strike the palm of her left hand down right where she stood, at which time the symbol began to brighten its glow and extend its light high into the sky. The glow overtook Daisy's body, and before she knew it, she dematerialized and flew into the heavens. Once she had completely vanished, the septagram disappeared.

Daisy opened her eyes to see Geno and all of her teammates standing around her. She stood up, out of the Silent Realm and back in the physical world and her Betedaimon form. There was a special presence about her that everyone seemed to notice except for Daisy herself.

"I got all seven, Geno," Daisy said, so calm that the others wondered if she had been tranquilized.

"Perfect, Kruna Daisy," replied Geno. "Your body has been preserved. No significant or noticeable amount of decay occurred in your absence, although you did cut it really close."

"Eh; we expect that from her," Bowser remarked.

"And so now, Daisy, it is time," Geno said. "Before we proceed any further with our preparations for Marissa, you must relinquish your current Betedaimon body and return back to normal."

"Okay – this just doesn't sit well with me!" snapped Andrew. He had been restless since the Kruna had returned from Chai City.

"What is it, Andrew?" Ramona asked.

Andrew clenched his jaw and fists with intensity. "Geno, Marissa said that you ran! Is this true?"

"What are you talkin' about, bro?" asked Marut.

"What do you mean 'ran,' Andrew?" Bowser asked. "Where did he run to? What did he run from?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting!" Andrew yelled. "But Marissa kept bringing up Geno's name and would not stop accusing him of running and hiding!"

"Again; running from what?" asked Bowser.

"No no no, Andrew," said Ramona. "Surely anything that witch says has to be some sort of deception or trickery or-"

"Yes, I ran," Geno said without hesitation. Silence took over the sanctuary. For a few moments, no one dared to utter a word. Geno broke the unsettling quiet, saying again, "Yes... I ran. That is why I have exiled myself to these lands here. My time as a Kruna has long been over."

"You're a Kruna?!" Marut blurted out.

" *Was* ," Geno corrected. "I was."

The Kruna and Neva sat in a semi-circle around Geno as he stood before them. From Geno's tone of voice when he requested for them to gather at the sandpit behind his house, the elemental wielders could tell what they were about to hear was not for the faint of heart. Geno looked upon them with undisguised remorse in his eyes.

"Good and evil," the cosmic being said. "They're both a part of a raging river with no certain route, destined to be forever intertwined and without a cease in flow until reality ends..."

He put up a hand sign and threw what appeared to be...nothing...into the ground. *Something* actually hit the ground and created an octagram of magic that filled the entire sandpit. The world around them turned black, the only illumination coming from the rainbow-colored eight-side star polygon emblazoned underneath them.

"Our existence has been within that of turmoil and chaos since the inception of the creators of our universe," Geno continued. As he talked, images of his words filled the air around Neva and the Kruna for them all to see with their own eyes. "Bloodshed, hatred, war, hunger, lust, poverty, greed, tyranny...you never knew who, where, when, why, or how, but you *always* knew the what. Our history is plagued with the constant battle for power between the just and the unjust. Nearly two millennia ago, our reality entered a golden era of peace. It was an era in which the evils that were so widespread in the past were reduced to just a fraction of their previous number. It was a renaissance period of wonders and beautiful landscapes, societal progressions exceeding all previous leaps. This, Era of Prosperity, went on for almost a thousand years. All were under the impression that it would last forever, and that all races of intelligent life would learn in the coming years to live together in harmony. Boy, were we wrong."

Ramona suppressed a shudder as if she felt something terrible was about to happen in Geno's tale. Although the group as a whole was attentive and engaged, Daisy, Marut, and Andrew especially were enchanted and captivated by the words and images before them. Athelstan and Neva appeared to be more interested in the history than the fantastical lore involved.

"It was through the Era of Prosperity that the Alkemei Pendants of Power were developed," said Geno. "These pendants were to serve a utilitarian purpose and help propel civilization towards even more advancements and innovations."

Geno sighed. At that point, the elemental wielders could all sense the change in the atmosphere. What Geno was telling them was information that not even Rosalina and the authorities at the Comet Observatory had told them yet. Of whether or not he was allowed to talk of such things, Geno did not appear to take into account.

"It was said that the most powerful Alkemei of all time, the Master Pendant, would be the key to everlasting peace," Geno continued. "Should an uprising ever occur, should a tyrant ever gain control and launch war, the world would turn to the Master Pendant and its awesome power to maintain the precious semblance of order that had taken ages to establish. One such being that arose, however, was unlike anything the world had ever seen before."

Daisy frowned. The way Geno had said that last part was a strong hint as to who he was about to mention. The scene around them turned overwhelmingly ominous and foreboding as a large, evil figure came into view.

"The Shadow Queen launched a campaign of hatred, destruction, and doom upon our planet," said Geno. "Before anyone could react, she stole the Master Pendant and adorned it. The great Alkemei raised her power to the levels that today are so commonly associated with her name. It took the legendary Four Heroes to strip her of the Master Pendant and seal her away, but it wasn't long before the Demon God, Osiris, replaced her to carry on what the Shadow Queen did not finish. The Master Pendant then fell into his control, though he made sure to not repeat the mistakes of his overlord."

Now Bowser frowned. Geno had seemingly started talking about what Rosalina had already told them earlier. *What's Geno going to say about it that Rosalina didn't, if anything?* the Kruna of Fire wondered.

Geno then took out a pouch from which he pulled eight oblong

stones. He set the stones down roughly equidistant to one another in an octagonal pattern. Each one was entirely a glossy sheen of one color; red, blue, black, brown, green, white, gold, and purple. "Four new warriors arose from the ruins of Osiris' rule to join the four who defeated the Shadow Queen," he said, at which time all the stones began to stand on end. "These eight made the first team of Kruna, the Kruna Genesis, of which I was the Kruna Genesis of Light, and of which our leader, the Kruna Genesis of Fire, was Marissa Arkana."

Daisy, Ramona, and Andrew glared at Geno in utter disbelief. Marut and Athelstan practically flipped out. Bowser's and Warra's expressions grew dark, calm but still startled by the revelation.

"No way!" Neva growled. "That can't be right!"

"At the time, we knew her as just Marissa, sans the 'Arkana' name," said Geno. "It was under her lead that we succeeded in sealing away Osiris through the Elemental Seal made possible by the combined forces of our elemental powers. Unfortunately, our actions had sealed him within the Master Pendant. Though we saved the planet and likely the universe from the Demon God, the world reverted back to chaotic turmoil shortly afterwards."

"How could someone like her ever have been a Kruna?" asked Andrew.

"Time is cruel," said Geno. "When we originally came together, Marissa was an altruistic leader and a righteous individual we were all proud to have on our team. It was not lost on any of us, though, that she possessed a chronic fear of death."

Daisy gasped, wide-eyed at the cosmic being's latter statement. *Just like my dad!* she thought.

"In the time after Osiris' downfall, she abandoned her elemental abilities over fire and took on spellcasting," Geno continued. "We encouraged her in pursuits, but agreed that she should retain her skills with fire. Instead, she then turned to witchcraft, intrigued by the various forbidden arts that promised powers and wisdom beyond mortal bounds. The Malocchio Eye was one of these abilities

deemed off-limits. As time passed, Marissa's morality fractured and decayed. Eventually, she decided to transform herself, giving up her humanity for demon blood in the hopes of magnifying her power and extending her life. 'Arkana' then became a part of her identity, in reference to the demonic form she took on."

Daisy's expression had become fierce. The parallels between Marissa Arkana and King Sarasa were beginning to pile up the more Geno's tale unfolded. On the ground, she saw the red stone move on its own, away from the group.

"Her descent into iniquity ate away at us," Geno went on. "We saw in her the lust for power, the intense anger in her soul, and the willingness to do whatever it took for full immortality. We saw that she had the potential to cap off the trifecta of planet-breaking catastrophes, so we made the decision to confront her."

As Geno continued deeper into his tale, the blue, black, brown, green, white, gold, and purple stones huddled together and moved towards the now brilliantly shinning red stone. "Enraged by our willingness to stand against her, Marissa engaged all seven of us in battle. She slaughtered our team until her and I were the only two of the Kruna Genesis left." One by one, all of the stones jolted and scattered across the ground until just the red and gold stone alone were standing. "I did what I could, but in the end, I was forced to run. I was doomed to fall, for although my life can span across the centuries, by no means have I ever had the immortality that she had successfully acquired. I was unable to stand up for my team, and for that reason, I exiled myself to this sanctuary here. I have been increasing my power over the years to ensure she wouldn't surpass me, but as it stands, so has she, and she has been getting stronger at a much faster pace than I as of late."

Coinciding with Geno's words, the gold stone tracked back and away while the red stone's glow shined even brighter than before. The red stone began to violently tremor and vibrate as it disturbed the ground it stood upon.

"Obviously, she did not tolerate immortality very well at all," Geno remarked. "It is because of Marissa that the No-Kill Policy for Kruna was created. As the years went on, her invincible, everlasting youth

turned her mad, violent, unstable, and careless in regards to life – mortal, immortal, and everywhere in between. And what did she do? She decided to add even more power to herself and fortified her eternal life to the point where she is now; completely indestructible."

Ramona scratched her head in wonder. "This No-Kill Policy..."

"A special policy among Kruna," Geno replied, anticipating the question before it was asked. "The killing of sentient, intelligent living beings is frowned upon. Such action ravages your reputation among other Kruna, cosmic beings, the Comet Observatory, the Great Beings, and potentially society as a whole. We believe that such an action – which invokes the ability to determine who lives on and who does not – should not be within the power of a Kruna, and is part of a list of immoral and forbidden abilities and deeds."

Warra's expression grew darker. He thought back to Elkon's Tower where he was forced to kill Grekka, wondering if that event would have been excused considering the circumstances or if it would follow him. Then he remembered his and Bowser's battle with Gargoyle Nukpana at the Air Shrine. Was Nukpana's death on Warra's hands as well, or was it a technicality on account of the fiend absorbing too much lightning at once?

"So," Geno said, sighing. "To answer your question, Andrew; yes, I did run."

The sanctuary around them became visible again, and the illumination of the eight stones died down. Geno went to retrieve each of them, picking them up with great care and placing them back in his special pouch. Daisy took particular note of how gently he handled the red stone.

"A team of eight must stand against her; one of each element," said Geno. "When she has been sufficiently weakened, then will be your time to strike, and *not* sooner. However, as it stands now, you are all still not ready. There are but two weeks remaining before the Blood Moon, and even with my assistance, you are all still too weak." With a stark rise in tone, he asserted, "Taking on Marissa Arkana in battle will by far be your greatest challenge yet. I don't care who or what you've faced before; take it from me, firsthand. She has only

become more powerful as time has passed. You all will likely not be ready to defeat her until the day of the Blood Moon. She will have increased in power as a result of the Blood Moon's influence, but the extra time taken to prepare will ensure that you will be at your most powerful as well."

"Then what must we do to ensure that we beat her?" asked Bowser.

"First thing's first," Geno replied. "At this point, it is time for Daisy to return to her original form."

Daisy nodded, solemn and serious. The others were expecting to hear more of a cheery attitude from her, but she was somewhat impartial about it. Her Betedaimon form had finally started to feel as natural as her normal body, not to mention the strange, surreal flow of power that coursed through her that she only just now had the opportunity to acknowledge. She wondered if she had managed to make peace with the beast within. "Okay, Geno," she then said. "I'm ready to change back whenever you are."

Geno laughed. "Oh no! I am not the one who can change you back."

"But then how will I return to normal?" Daisy asked, confused.

"You must travel to Watcher's Cape," replied Geno. "This remote locale is Sarasaland's northeastern-most peninsula – a thin, crooked strip of land jutting eastward out into the ocean and curling south like a hook. Within the Watcher's Cape is a special chamber in which lies a pathway to an alternate dimension. You need not worry about the alternate dimension, for you are in search of the keeper of the gate, the great and powerful-"

Marut shot his hand up. "Wizard of – OW!"

"Shut up, man!" Andrew said, having smacked the air wielder in the back of the head.

"You must go to Watcher's Cape to seek out the great and powerful Culex," Geno finished. "He is a Dark Knight originating from the aforementioned alternate dimension, and is most skilled in the way of spells and venoms among other things. When you have been

reverted back to normal, Daisy, then you will return here, and we can begin our final preparations and training for the fated day."

Daisy turned to look at her teammates as they all rose and came together. "So what do you think, guys? You're all up for coming with me?"

"We'll follow you into Hell if that's where we have to go," Andrew replied.

"Or to the zoo," Athelstan added. "Sorry; I had to get that one in!"

"Kick rocks, Athelstan," Daisy said with a smile. The Kruna of Stone made a haughty laugh in response. She looked over at Neva, who was keeping her distance from the group. "Neva? You're more than welcome to come along too if you'd like. We'd prefer it."

Neva's arms were folded as she stared at the ground, her posture hunched and facing away from everyone as if she were trying to hide. But after a couple moments of silence, she said, "Yeah, okay. Whatever."

"You know, if you wish to remain in this current Betedaimon form, you most certainly can," said Geno. "Culex could surely neutralize the venom but not extract it if you wish, therein keeping you in your current form but preventing any further progression. It's possible that you might even be the better for it!"

Daisy, surprised by Geno's remark, made a quick scan of her body, then peered at each of her teammates. She felt certain what her answer needed to be. "It sounds cool, but my duty requires that I fulfill my destiny as a fully human Kruna."

"Understood, great Kruna of Earth," Geno replied with a bow. "But be wary. The path to Culex will not be easy to traverse. In order to be granted access to his chamber, you must pass all of the trials that block his path. You may be forced to face things that you would never have thought you would face in your wildest imaginations."

"We can handle it," Daisy assured, eyes wide and bright. "But, can we do one thing first before we go to Culex? It would mean a lot to

me."

Chapter XXVIII

Metal Gear Kruna :

The moon's position in the sky would have been discernible to a savvy wanderer or journeyman as an indicator of the time nearing three hours past midnight. While the rest of their team slept, Daisy and Warra arrived at the outside of Castle Town. Nearly the entire city looked to be asleep. Very few if any lights were on, and no footsteps or words could be heard; that is, except for the loud, lumbering thuds they heard that caused them to dive into the bushes.

"How many times is this going to happen?" Daisy whispered.

"Who knows," Warra whispered back. "Let's just stay here for now."

Metal Mario marched around what was the southern entrance to Castle Town, looking clueless and aimless as per usual. It looked indecisive as to whether it should wander around in the city or venture off into Sarasa Field. Either way, its presence prevented Daisy and Warra from entering the city. What they needed to accomplish had to be done without drawing attention or unwanted stalkers.

"We need to figure out how we're going to do this," Warra whispered.

"I say I just run up to him and throw him away," Daisy hissed. "Or better yet, I should just trap him underground."

Neither of the two Kruna would have to make a decision, for a pack of two dozen hellhounds had already started gathering around Metal Mario. The fiendish canines antagonized Metal Mario, making aggressive advances that provoked the metal figure into making retaliatory gestures in response. The exchange looked like it would go on for a while.

"Let's slip past them while they sort that whole thing out," whispered

Warra.

With the hellhounds and Metal Mario occupying each other with increasingly violent movements, Daisy and Warra crept through the bushes and along the city wall to sneak into Castle Town. They rounded a corner to ensure that they would not be seen or followed by either the dogs or Metal Mario.

The Castle Town streets were bare, the buildings were dark, and aside from the occasional light through the window, there was no sign that anyone was still awake. The lightposts scattered about were either dimmed or completely off. Still, the two Kruna maintained a light tread through town to get to where they intended to go. Daisy had insisted that she be allowed to embark on this quick side quest before traveling to Watcher's Cape, so they agreed that she and Warra would go while the others slept, and that they would all leave in the afternoon the next day.

The more towards the inner portion of Castle Town they got, the more the city was lit up. The increase in lights was relative though, considering the early morning time. There was an uptick in activity, just the result of a handful of guards out watching – albeit wearily – the streets. Getting past them was simple enough. Once Daisy and Warra neared the Central Castle, they noticed Bellbridge glowing high off in the distance.

"I don't remember that ever being there," Daisy remarked in surprise. The last time she was in Castle Town, Bellbridge's lights were not on, and she was far more concerned with the economic disparity of the city and with getting to her father to even notice the massive skywalk towards the north. Granted, from their current position, the only way they were even able to notice it then and there was because of Bellbridge's lights and because of the illumination from the Sarasaland Campanile's clock that highlighted and drew attention to it.

Soon, Daisy and Warra made it to the Central Castle. Two guards leaned against the walls framing the front doors, both wielding Earth Ripper claws and a Seismic Spear. Even though they were well-armed, it did nothing to cover up their exhaustion.

Warra grabbed Daisy's arm the moment she moved. "Before you go in trying to subdue those two sentries, why not stay low and go around to check the back?"

"Fine," Daisy muttered, rolling her eyes. She shook her head as she led Warra around to the back of the massive complex, just wanting to get inside. Unfortunately for them, it would take a little more effort than they thought. Once they got around to the courtyard in the back, they caught sight of four more guards meandering around.

"Go around the back, you said," Daisy grumbled.

"Look up," Warra whispered.

Bellbridge loomed overhead, the grand structure providing light for the immediate area. If Daisy and Warra weren't in such a hurry, they would've detoured and tried to find a way to get up to the enchanting skywalk. It would've either been a wondrous experience, or a chance to mess up whatever her father planned with it.

"Seriously, what is that for?" Daisy wondered aloud. "Should we be concerned about it?"

"I don't know," replied Warra. "But judging by the way it's built, it may be able to get us into the castle from the top."

Daisy pointed a finger skyward. "But look how high up it is! How are we supposed to get all the way up there from here? We'd have to detour and spend too much time trying to figure out where the entrance to the skywalk is." She pulled back her arms and began focusing her energy. "I say we just screw all this sneaking around and force our way in!"

"Do not!" Warra hissed. "Listen; I have a idea..."

"Here, guards!" Warra called out to the sentries at the front door. He kept poking Daisy in the back with the handles of his axes, urging her on with her hands behind her back. "I've captured a rogue beast that was wandering the streets!"

"Good work, mate," the first guard replied. "This is an ugly one, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah, definitely," the second guard agreed. "It's like a wolf that wanted to be a gargoyle!" He started laughing as Daisy growled in anger.

"Nature sure does give us some strange things, doesn't it?" said the first guard.

"Uh, yeah, it sure does!" Warra replied. "But I wouldn't say that she's ugly, no, not at all. I'd say she has a natural beauty to her that we as humans can't comprehend."

"What are you, high?" the first guard snapped.

"Poppin' too many 'shrooms I see," the second guard said. "Look, waterboy here thinks he's one of the Mario Brothers!"

"I think you'd fit in much better with the Final Fantasy Thirteen crew, buddy," the first guard remarked with a laugh.

Warra made an uncomfortable chuckle. "Yeah, what was I thinking, you know?"

"Wait, a minute..." the first guard then said. "Why are you in water wielder getup? You're supposed to be in uniform!"

"Yeah – what's your name anyways?" the second guard asked.

"Uh, oh, sorry," Warra replied. "My name is...Snake. Water Snake. You know, like the...Water Moccasin, native of...Koopa Cape. I like snakes...now...I guess..."

"Oh," the second guard said. "Well in that case, here." He tossed his keys for the front doors to Warra. "Go on inside and get suited up with the extras in the front office. Just 'cause we're on the overnight shift doesn't mean you can be out of uniform!"

"Ah, right, of course!" said the Kruna of Water, the two guards oblivious to his awkward tone. "I should definitely do that." He pushed Daisy forward past the guards, following her just offset to

her side. "Come, my captured beast – I don't trust you enough to let you out of my sight. These two gentlemen here don't know what kinds of horrible, nasty things you are capable of that I have endured and can anticipate since I have been the only one able to tame you thus far, and I don't want them to have to experience it firsthand-"

"Hold on," the first guard said, causing both Daisy and Warra to jump. "Why isn't that animal handcuffed?"

Daisy whipped around to face the two guards, grabbed them by the necks, and slammed their heads together. She caught one of them while Warra caught the other, and they quietly laid them down on the floor.

"So I could do that," Daisy said to the unconscious guards.

Warra shook his head as he went to unlock the doors. "They're badgering me about uniforms when they don't even have their helmets on."

Once through the front doors, Daisy led Warra through the noiseless halls of the Central Castle. They went through one of the kitchens, pased one of the expansive studies, and then climbed the stairs until they were up and onto the same flour Daisy worked her way to herself when she was in the Silent Realm. It didn't take long before they were at the door she passed through before. She turned the knob, and they walked inside.

"Unbelievable," Daisy murmured. She wasn't sure when she saw her old room in the Silent Realm, but now, seeing it in the physical world confirmed her belief. Her room was exactly the way she had left it five years ago before her father gave her up to Tatanga. Whether or not everything was where she left it, she couldn't tell. But there was one thing more noticeable than anything else; dust. It was all over the place, and aside from where Daisy and Warra had already stepped, it was all undisturbed.

"I don't understand," said Daisy. "As bad and as careless as they were, I thought they would've cleared my room out...not just leave it here as I left it..." She eased her way over to draw the curtains to let the light from the moon and the city creep in.

Warra pushed the button on her TV, which to his surprise turned on. "Everything that was plugged in before is still plugged in."

"Well, leave it on for a minute," Daisy said, noticing a sports channel come on. Warra prevented her from seeing any highlights and turned the TV off. "Warra! C'mon man!"

"It would have made too much noise," Warra asserted. "But back to what I said, look over there."

Daisy turned to her old nightstand to see her alarm clock reading, "3:36 AM." She then frowned in confusion. "In the time that I was gone, wouldn't the power of had gone out at least once for whatever reason?" she asked. She pulled the nightstand's drawer, but closed it almost immediately.

Warra shrugged. "Not if the power lines are built underground and there's a healthy supply of backup generators available. Would you say that this city's good with controlling seismic activity?"

"I guess," Daisy muttered, looking through her closet. "I never really paid attention to any of that." Her closet had all of her old princess dresses and athletic earth wielder outfits. "Wow; it's been quite a while since I even wore a dress! Man, those things are way too formal! I hate how everybody puts on all these dresses and suits and fancy clothes instead of wearing something you'd be able to move around in and retaliate or fend off enemies! I'll tell you one thing – if I was in charge around here, I wouldn't be having mandatory uniforms for my guards!"

"I'm starting to think those two just didn't like blue and gold," Warra said, blushing.

"Oh 'cmon, Warra!" Daisy replied, ducking down to the floor. "The amount of people that actually judge others by their elemental affiliation is actually very few and far between here!" She checked under her bed and pulled out a massive, rectangular tub of Legos; system, technic, and constraction pieces all in abundance.

"Yeah, but those few and far are – is 'elementist' the word?" muttered Warra. "Like how Andrew was talking before about people

being elementist towards shadow."

"Okay, but he didn't use the exact word when he was talking about it," Daisy replied, fishing through the plastic pieces.

Warra threw his hands up. "Why are you messing around with Legos *now* of all times?"

"I have to figure out what my mother's been doing around here," she said. "And if she's not here, why, and where she's gone. She was just like my dad as a kid, but looking back, I don't think it was on purpose. She kinda just used to follow his example and didn't question him much if at all unless it was something obvious. I've been wondering if she was just married to my dad and adhering to his will just to secure her position as the queen. And if that's the case, well..." Her voice trailed off for a few moments. "Damn, it's not down here! I can't remember where I put it before!" She shifted the tub back under her bed and went to look through her dresser. She dug around through the top drawer until she felt her hand tap something hard underneath the bunches of folded fabric.

Warra was just barely able to notice Daisy's face perk up in the darkness of the room. "Did you find it?"

Daisy nodded, pulling out a case that, when opened, revealed two bracelets, each with a charm that mirrored the large flower button on her shirt. "These were my mother's before she gave them to me," she said. "I never did wear them, but I made sure I held onto them." She closed the dresser behind her, then snapped the case shut and handed it to Warra. "You hold onto it. If she's not here, then maybe we can figure out some kind of way to use these to track her down."

"You're trusting me with these?" Warra asked. "Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Why not," Daisy replied. "Why would I not trust you?"

Warra smiled, saying with sincerity, "That means a lot." Daisy returned his smile with one of her own.

"Are you having fun in there, daughter?"

Daisy and Warra both froze. The two gathered at the doorway, King Sarasa waiting just outside of Daisy's room. The expressions of both of the Kruna instantly turned dark.

"Having security cameras spread throughout the castle makes things so much better," King Sarasa said.

"Damn," Warra muttered. "I forgot to take that into account..."

"Warra!" Daisy groaned. "You're supposed to be the stealth guy!"

"I didn't think anyone was going to be awake!" Warra replied. "Especially not your dad!"

"I don't need sleep," said King Sarasa. "I'm not like you mortals. Not anymore. I'm something greater, and will continue to grow into something even more than what I am now. I will be far and above you humans...or, whatever *you* happen to be now, fiendish hound."

"So what if I *look* like a beastly monster?" Daisy said, standing tall and proud. "I know I'm not, and I know *you* are."

"I don't think insomnia counts as being better than us," Warra sharply remarked.

"You're a bad influence, Daisy," King Sarasa grumbled. "Never listened to my directions, never adhered to discipline, and now here you have a nice young man – though, who really should consider getting a haircut – and you teach him to act rudely to his superiors?"

"You're not a superior to either one of us!" Daisy snapped.

"And that's where you're wrong, as always," the king replied. "You see, this is *my* castle, *my* city, *my* nation. It could have been *yours* , and you could've been in the position to say that you have no superiors, but you wanted to be defiant and decided that playing ball and running and lifting things and trying to become even the slightest bit competent with earth wielding was what you were going to pursue."

Daisy smirked. "I'm great at what I do. It's not my fault you're a terrible leader."

King Sarasa revealed a pair of handcuffs from the back of his robe and lashed at Daisy, only for Warra to step up and unlimber one of his axes to make a timely block. Daisy did not so much as flinch during the lightning quick exchange.

"Maybe you would've been able to react faster if you had gotten some sleep," Warra spat. He forced the flat of his ax down to wrench the handcuffs out of the king's hand.

"You see that?" Daisy remarked. "That's what happens when those that follow you respect you for who you are. They'll do what Warra just did because they want to, not out of fear or obligation like how you and your people work. Maybe you should take that into consideration when you're dealing with Sarasaland!"

King Sarasa started laughing. "So what now? Are you going to try and take me down?"

Daisy had no response to the statement. She just gave her father an intense stare.

"Go ahead," said the king. "Just try. Right this moment. Make me pay for being a man and taking what's meant to be mine. I can see the headlines in the coming days; 'King Sarasa Mauled by a Ravenous Beast! Monster on the Prowl – Public Enemy Alert!' Then the whole nation – possibly the whole world – will see you for what you are." He looked at Warra. "And you, the beast tamer. Anything she does to me will be on your hands as well, you know that. They'll ascribe you as the one who cast this monster on me. Maybe they'll pin the disappearances around here on you too."

"Disappearances?" Warra asked.

"Yes," King Sarasa said. "It seems as if more and more people are disappearing by the day, and not a single clue can be had as to where they've gone. I guess it's been going on for years now, but there has been a huge spike in the past handful of months or so. It's a shame, but I'm sure they're missed."

Daisy started growling, remembering her father's address at 2SU and the lack of time spent addressing the subject of Sarasaland's

missing people. "And you have done nothing about it, have you?" she barked.

"There are more pressing matters," her father replied. "People die everyday. There's no getting around that, so why should that be any higher on my priority list than it is already? It's a wonder it's even on my list, if you ask me."

Daisy had heard enough. Rage began to bubble within her, making her ready to use her mangled hand-claws to rip into her father right then and there. *But what would that make me... s* he wondered.

Not allowing any sign of anger to shine through other than an indignant angle of her eyebrows, she pushed past King Sarasa. Warra followed close behind. The two Kruna walked along the polished railing to make their way to the stairs, neither one of them looking back. Daisy had completely forgot about asking what happened to her mother.

King Sarasa didn't pursue. He stayed back by the open door of Daisy's old room and watched his daughter and her friend descend the stairs. He frowned, letting out a deep sigh as he muttered to himself, "It didn't have to be like this."

Chapter XXIX

Watcher's Cape :

"Hit the lever! HIT THE LEVER!" yelled Marissa.

"I don't know what I'm doing!" Machula shouted. "Maki, I need you to throw me over to that ledge over there and – oh c'mon!"

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT, KING BOO?!" Marissa screamed. "Are you serious?! We can't get past the first level of adventure mode?!"

"We're gonna be here all day, aren't we?" muttered Maki.

"What the hell is going on here?" Tamara snapped. It was near noon when he rushed into the room in the upper level of their mansion to find Marissa, King Boo, Machula, and Maki all sitting in front of a sizable TV.

"Can't you see the screen?" King Boo replied. "We're playing 'Super Smash Bros. Climax' – based on the real life Super Smash Bros. Tournament! *That* is the hell that is going on here!"

"Help me!" Maki cried, slamming the joystick around in all directions.

"Just stay back and pick 'em off with your blaster!" exclaimed King Boo. "They're Goombas! They don't do anything but run at you!"

"Wow, it really is based on real life," muttered Tamara.

"Pick 'em off with the blaster!" King Boo repeated.

"No, that'll take too long!" Maki replied. "I don't wanna waste anyone time!"

"You're wasting *everyone* time by dying," Machula taunted. "And you're butchering everyone grammar!"

"Tarzan-speak, Kong-lingo," said Marissa, trying to imitate a

primitive voice. "Everyone come, we must win fight, must win game!"

"I'm under pressure – screw grammar!" Maki snapped.

King Boo shook his head. "Look, you don't gotta charge shot them into oblivion – just jump on their heads! No – why did you throw the gun away? It still had charge in it!"

"It did?" Maki asked.

"I can't figure out how to get my guy to jump up over there!" Machula growled. "I've tried everything but he just puffs up and tries to float over."

"Yeah, 'cause you wanted to choose that garbage-tier blue penguin guy!" Marissa replied, laughing. "Oh, look at me! I got a giant frickin' hammer and I'm fat! La-dee-FRICKIN'-DA! I should be in Happy Feet, but I'm stuck tap dancing here with you jackasses!"

"Alright, so, can we get back to something of substance?" asked Tamara. "What about going over the preparations for the coming Blood Moon? How about checking out the current state of the Central Castle and their relationship in regards to the rest of Sarasaland? What about-"

"Tamara," Marissa muttered. "Just... Just... Okay?"

"Yeah, c'mon man!" Maki said. "We've been at it for a while! We're taking a break!"

"An indefinite break," Marissa added, laughing like a kid.

Tamara looked at the demon witch like she had gone mad. *Oh wait; she did already,* he said in his mind.

"What's up with this woman and her hair?" asked King Boo. "It's like every attack I make, she has to involve her hair."

"Maki!" Marissa screamed. "Swing the remote! Swing the remote! DAMNIT! NO! AGAIN! QUIT WASTING OUR LIVES ON FRICKIN' GOOMBAS!"

"Maki, you're the pink puff dude," said Machula. "Just suck everything up."

Maki nodded. "Okay, let me try this – woops!"

"Not me, you cone-hat dunderhead!" King Boo screeched.

"You know what would be messed up?" asked Marissa. "It's like, we play through this game, and then we find out that the Sarasa girl's a playable character-"

"It'll be training to beat her!" Maki remarked, laughing.

"Nah, I don't think we would *ever* see that," said King Boo. "Oh, but you know what – we've been seeing this too often-"

"That's it!" shouted Marissa. "I've had it with these monkey-fighting Goombas in this Monday-to-Friday game!"

"That makes no sense, Marissa!" Machula yelled.

"Now they're throwing spikes down on us from the air," King Boo muttered. "They're just dropping out of the air with no rhyme or reason!"

"MAKI!" Marissa screamed. "WHY DID YOU EAT ALL THE FOOD?! YOU'RE ALREADY AT ZERO PERCENT!"

"I thought I could store it for later," Maki replied.

"Well, yeah, if you want us to eat your barf!" yelled Marissa.

"You can be heard a mile away," said Tamara. "This is craziness up here-"

"Yo – shut up, Tamara," Marissa snapped. "What the hell are you laughing at, Maki? Suck them all up already!"

"Why don't we just spam smash attacks?" suggested King Boo. "I mean, do we really need anything else?"

"Not if you're a noob," said Maki.

"This is actually the farthest we've ever gotten and – GOOMBAS!" Marissa groaned. "Again! This is ridiculous. There's so many of them. So dumb. They just get killed automatically – they're throwing themselves to die!"

"Look, Lord Arkana," Tamara impatiently said. "Cerberus should be close to resurrection, but the rest of the hellhounds are getting restless, so-"

"Oh my damn – Tamara!" moaned Marissa. "Can you just be cool? Just once? Please? Can you just once be cool? Tamara? Please? Just once? Can you *just* be cool? Please? One time? Once? Please?"

Tamara cocked his head to the side and gave the group a weird look, then casually walked out the room. The group heard him muttering, "I need an aspirin."

"What?! WHAT?!" Marissa screamed at the TV. "ARE YOU SERIOUS?! THE FIRST NON-GOOMBA ENEMIES WE GOT TO AND THEY KILL US ALL?!"

"To be fair, *they* deflected *your* fireballs to set off the bombs," said Maki. "Next time, don't choose the Italian guy in overalls, and we won't have to worry about getting blown off screen."

"Hey, he has an 'M' on his hat!" Marissa snapped. "That stands for Marissa! Case in point."

"Oh sweet," said Machula. "Look; I picked flowers."

Marissa gave Machula a strange, annoyed look. "Wha – get the hell away from me."

The portal opened to transport the Kruna and Neva to the beginning of the northeastern peninsula Geno had described to them. Ramona and Andrew had tried to bridge their technique closer to Watcher's Cape itself, but they encountered some sort of bizarre, unexplainable interference that prevented them from doing so. Where they ended up was more inland than they would've liked, but

they were close enough to be considered within walking distance.

The environment around them was a set of ruins scattered among the rocky terrain that otherwise disrupted the flatness of the landscape. The sky above had a reddish hue towards Watcher's Cape, yet was normal in the opposite direction. The atmosphere had a very mystical, ethereal, and strikingly eerie feel to it.

A short trip through the ancient remains brought the team to a coastline that led into a very thin peninsula no wider than an eighth of a mile but nearly ten times that in length. Off at the end of the projection of land was an arch that appeared to be a gateway to a chain of five expansive bridges, each one of substantial length and connected by a column of land jutting up from the waters of the bay. The bridges seemed to serve as a continuation of the curve of the peninsula as they led further away from the mainland. The end destination at the conclusion of the bridges was an island far off in the distance in the shape of a metallically fortified mountain that looked like it had a face.

"Something tells me the depressed mountain is Culex's Chamber," Bowser said.

As they made their way to the start of the peninsula, the elemental wielders noticed not just the silence of the area but the apparent lack of any form of complex life. The environment was barren, as if it had been long abandoned and never returned to. Daisy and Warra both found it quite odd, considering that Watcher's Cape was not that far away from the rest of Sarasaland.

"Ruins, red sky, lack of both wild and intelligent life," Warra murmured. "There's something off about this place."

"I'm not sensing anything malevolent around here," Andrew said.

"Neither am I," Ramona added.

"I don't think any of us are," stated Bowser. "There's just a mystique about this place that's really powerful."

"Would you say, transcendent, Bowser?" Daisy asked. "Maybe it's

the purified chakras of mine, but this area seems surreal to the point of being mythical." Ever since she had awoken from the Silent Realm, everything around her had a different feel to it. The world felt weightless to her, and could feel her aura pulsating at a rate not before realized. She wondered to what the extent would Geno's lessons affect her body.

"Whatever it is, it's making me feel funny," Bowser replied. "Anything wicked around here? I don't think so."

"So quit being the guy who looks left-right-left before crossing the street, Warra," said Andrew.

"That's yet to be seen, you guys," said Warra. "We don't know what lies ahead."

"And we won't know if we stop walking just to sit around and ponder it," Daisy said.

Once the group made their way to the large stone arch, they passed underneath and trekked the length of the first bridge. It must've taken almost five whole minutes just to reach the first plot of land sticking up from the water, but they were met with an uncomfortable sight once they got there. The chunk of land was split in two right across the middle. The chasm must have spread about fifty yards, with nothing but a long, lengthy drop to the water below.

"I don't think I can jump that," said Ramona. "What about you guys?"

Marut put a hand up. "I can!"

"I want to say I can," Daisy said. "Crystal Grip'll get me to cling to the wall if I'm short and miss it."

"I might," stated Neva, not adding anything more.

"Is that it? Anybody else?" Ramona asked. "No?"

"Here's a thought," said Athelstan. "Why not just let me shift the terrain a little so we can make the jump?"

"Here's another thought," Andrew said. "Why don't we jump and let

Marut push us over to the other side?"

Athelstan shrugged. "I don't know. Which one makes more sense?"

"Which one's more fun?" Andrew asked.

"Can we just go?!" Daisy growled. "I don't have the patience to be wasting time like this!"

"If I may present a little thought experiment; why is there a chasm here in the first place?" asked Warra. "Obviously, if there are bridges leading up to Culex's Chamber that connect each of these upward projections of land, then why wouldn't there be a bridge to connect this marginally shorter gap? This land was divided on purpose – Culex must not want anyone entering his territory."

"That's too bad," said Bowser. "We've got to get Daisy back to normal, and this is the only way we know how, so we're crossing over that chasm and moving down that second bridge."

"So, Athelstan," Andrew said. "Did Rosalina by any chance happen to give you a Pendant of Flight that you didn't tell us about earlier either?"

"That would've been helpful," the Kruna of Stone replied, taking out his spear. "But let's just do it this way." He jammed his tool into the ground and projected an extension of the rocky terrain to make the jump more manageable for everyone. "And Marut can blow us over if we're short."

Since the extension was narrow, they had to go one person at a time. Bowser went first, leaping and then using his Whirling Fortress move to carry him over to the other side. Ramona, Athelstan, Warra, and Andrew then made the next jumps and had Marut blow them over. Neva made the jump on her own, leaving Daisy and Marut. Up until now, the process had been smooth. Daisy went for her jump, but a fierce wind kicked up just before she made it all the way over. The gust was unusually swift, and put an end to Daisy's forward momentum. She was blown laterally, and would have fallen to a watery grave had she not caught the side of the chasm and latched her hands into the rock wall. Her Crystal Grip worked just as well in

her Betedaimon form as it did in her real body.

Panicking, Marut launched himself over to the other side and then looked over the edge to bring a gust of wind that blew Daisy back up from the drop. She touched down her feet next to her team, none the worse for her experience. The others let out sighs of relief.

"I swear, I did not bring in that first gust!" Marut exclaimed, frantic with his words.

"It's alright, calm down, Marut," Daisy replied. "Freak circumstance is all it was."

"So does that mean there's more freak circumstances ahead?" asked Neva.

"It's not freak," said Warra. "That's just what happens for trying to have fun in situations like this."

"Hey, loosen up, why don't ya?" Daisy said. "We're just going to go visit Culex."

"No, I'm not going to loosen up!" Warra snapped. "What about the trials Geno was talking about?"

"Are you suggesting gusts of winds are trials?" Neva muttered with sarcasm.

"You really should just relax, Warra," said Daisy. "We just need to cross four more bridges and we're at Culex's Chamber. We don't gotta worry about anything else but that, trials or no trials."

King Sarasa's address right outside of the Central Castle to the people of Castle Town garnered a large audience, and rightfully so. The event up north in the Chai Kingdom could not be ignored, and the more time passed, the more concerned people became. Confusion and disorder had already started to rise after word got out about the happenings at the Great Canyon. Naturally, a large majority of the citizens throughout Sarasaland stuck by their king. But now, more than ever before, there was a significant chunk of the

population that didn't know what to think of their leader. A small but noticeable amount of people made a serious effort in questioning the king and his intentions. Even though there was never a time where his control over Sarasaland had been shaken as much as it was then and there, King Sarasa was confident that it would resolve itself over time.

"As I have already said at the beginning of our gathering this morning, the destruction of Chai City saddens me," King Sarasa projected through the mic. "It is a hard hit to Sarasaland. None of us would have ever conceived – let alone wanted to see – one of our most productive cities burnt down in such a manner. It is a sad day for us all, but we can rebuild, and New Chai City will be stronger than all that came before, I assure you all of that!"

The crowd gave their usual cheers for King Sarasa. Nothing seemed any different from past addresses and speeches he gave. *My people* , he thought. "And don't forget; in just a couple more weeks, we'll be having our annual Sarasaland Harvest Moon Festival! Let's have a high turnout this year to show our support for this grand nation!"

At that point, a melodic chant of "Sarasaland" erupted from the crowd. After spending nearly four hours on, around, over, under, and through the subject of both the Great Canyon *and* Chai City, answering questions, and giving his first takes and reactions on the great fire, King Sarasa had nothing left to say regarding the matter that he didn't already touch on before. He gave a few more closing statements and comments to wrap things up, after which the huge mass of people began to disband and return back to their lives and duties. The king stayed outside for a little while as the crowd continued to diminish and as his associates cleared his setup. A little boy and a girl walked up to the king, a unique shirt in each of their hands.

"Can you sign our stuff, Mr. King Sarasa?" asked the girl. They both held out their shirts to him and pulled out pens from their pockets.

King Sarasa made a hearty chuckle, reaching for the shirts and pens. "Oh, that's adorable! How old are you two kids?"

"I'm eight," the girl replied.

"I'm six," the boy mumbled, looking shy.

"Those are great ages to be at, you two," King Sarasa said with merriness. "You've got your whole lives ahead of you and all the time in the world to decide who you want to be. Who knows? Maybe someday, you kids'll grow up to be just like me."

Chapter XXX

Ambush? :

Ramona barely ducked in time. A burst of blue fire rippled through the air and sailed off into the distance behind her, exploding when it dropped down and touched the water. The near miss wasn't half as disturbing as who created the flames.

"Alright, can somebody explain what's going on?!" the Kruna of Light shouted. "Any time now would be really great!"

The Kruna had dashed down the second of the five long bridges to find a host of nightmares waiting for them on the next plot of land. Blocking their way were Necromancer, Necropaladin, Dimentio, Elkon, Vodyanoy, Popple, Dry Bowser, and at the head of this assemblage of powerful entities, Marissa Arkana herself. Excluding Marissa, all were beings they had collectively faced before, but their presence as a team here at Watcher's Cape of all places made no sense. Everything was made all the more compelling by the fact that all of these beings – except for again, Marissa, and maybe Dimentio and Popple – were supposed to be either dead or inanimate. Strangely enough, Necromancer, Necropaladin, and Dry Bowser did not appear to be undead and were instead actually somehow living. The only conclusion that could be made was that this was all the work of the demon witch, and that she somehow managed to resurrect and reanimate *all* of these entities through some forbidden spell of hers. Even if that was the case, the Kruna wondered why Elkon, who became their ally before sacrificing his life force to them, would now be here fighting against them; unless of course, Marissa had some sort of mind control ability through her Malocchio Eye. There was little time to decipher what was a pretty jarring turn of events, though, as bolts of magic, shrouds of blue fire, Spatial Projections, and plenty more drove the Kruna back. All these beings in front of them were here now, and they were hostile.

"And here I thought we would only have to beat these guys once!" grunted Bowser, shifting away from one of Elkon's spatial bursts. "I'd

like to know why you're back, Elkon, and why all of a sudden you want to oppose us again, but if you don't want to say anything, then fine – be that way! I never got to fight you anyways!"

"I'm actually glad I get another chance against this guy!" yelled Athelstan with a swing of his spear. Necropaladin blocked with his massive sword and threw a swipe of his own. Athelstan edged just out of the way and snapped his leg up into Necropaladin, causing the undead warrior to fall apart on contact. The Kruna of Stone's face lit up in confusion. He didn't even use his Alkemei Odina to fortify what he felt was only a simple kick even with the boost from his Boot Club Additions, and yet Necropaladin, who had not even said anything the whole time, was reduced to pieces. For a while, he just stood there and stared at the dismantled figure.

"Get moving, Athelstan!" shouted Andrew. "Don't just stand there waiting to get picked off!"

Further towards the other bridge, Daisy was locked in combat with Dimentio. She vaguely recalled Mario and Luigi talking about this "dimensional contortionist" who could somehow change the laws of reality if given enough time. As such, she pressed her offense to prevent giving the jester-like being an opportunity to utilize his abilities to the fullest. Even so, Dimentio didn't appear to be doing anything other than hovering around and evading Daisy's melee strikes.

If Mario and Luigi could beat him, I can beat him too! Daisy thought, whipping around with a kick. Dimentio countered by removing the third-dimension of his body just long enough to avoid getting hit and then reverted back to normal to send out a barrage of energy spheres. Forcefully knocked back, Daisy dug her clawed hands into the ground to keep from getting sent off the edge into a long drop to the water below.

"I am *not* losing to you!" growled Daisy. She rushed forward at Dimentio and leapt at him, readying her Crystal Kick mid-flight. She formed the crystal mass around the lower portion of her leg just as she had done numerous times before, but then something went wrong. The earth around her foot refused to stay stable in its crystalline form, causing several shards to expand and protrude

from her leg. This meant that Daisy did not land a blunt force Crystal Kick on Dimentio, but rather stabbed a batch of crystals through her foe's body instead.

Daisy gasped and dispelled the crystal from around her leg as quickly as she could, somersaulting through the air to make a swift landing. Without hesitation, she snapped herself around to get a glimpse of her motionless, unintentional victim. Wide-eyed and mouth agape, she froze in place as she wondered how she could have let her technique become so lethal. She felt a void form within her, an emptiness comparable to that of the dying body of Dimentio.

By the time Andrew had been able to gain some distance between him and Marissa, Neva had wrecked Popple, Warra was locked in combat with Vodyanoy, Bowser was working his way around Elkon's spatial techniques, Ramona was still on the defensive against Dry Bowser, and Marut was matching his lightning against Necromancer's light. Oddly enough, not a single one of the Kruna's opponents had said anything during the colossal battle.

"What's going on here," Andrew muttered. "Usually, we can't get these guys to shut up."

Marissa charged a bolt of mystic energy from her broom and fired it off. It was a speedy blast, but not anything Andrew couldn't handle. With his Shadow Blades, he deflected the blast upwards into the air where it dispersed in a very unorthodox manner. The burst appeared to spread out across the sky rather than fade and dissipate.

"Not sure how you got this assemblage of yours together, Marissa," said Andrew. "But it won't do you any good. We're getting Daisy to Culex's Chamber, whether that be around you, over you, or through you. Your choice."

Marissa did not give a reply. She did not even seem to be her usual goofy, crazed self. She wasn't even as creepy or outlandish as the Kruna had come to know her to be. In fact, she was rather tame. Her expression was blank, showing not only calm but an actual sense of

sanity. Infuriated by his confusion, Andrew fired a bolt of shadow from each of his blades. Marissa made no effort to get out of the way, instead waving her hand to freeze the shadows in midair. Then the shadows shook, dispersed, and flew away with the wind. At this point, Andrew was expecting some sly grin or coy remark from the demon witch. But still, Lord Arkana gave neither. If Andrew didn't know any better, he would've thought that she actually wasn't a deranged entity of evil at all.

Undeterred by her defense but a little hesitant to attack her because of how innocent she appeared, Andrew put away his blades to prepare another attack. With a snap of his finger, a combustive, bursting ball of darkness materialized in his hand. He threw the highly unstable mass of shadows at the demon witch, the attack exploding and enveloping her upon contact. Yet somehow, Marissa remained unaffected. She used some of her mystic power to cut through the attack and push it back onto Andrew. Down he went, pride shaken by the fact that it was his own attack.

In a great deal of pain, the Kruna of Shadow picked himself up off the grassy ground. Something just did not seem right here. Marissa had taken everything he had to throw at her without any sign of fatigue, let alone injury or even damage. What's more, her demeanor the entire time she was there had been incredibly jarring. More than a couple times, a few of the other Kruna had glanced over from their own fights and noticed Marissa's lack of malice and wickedness.

This has to be one of her tricks, Andrew asserted to himself. *Nothing else around here is making sense, so this has to be one of her convoluted spells that's doing all this. But why would she put herself out here like this too? If it isn't her doing all this, then who could it be?*

Marissa just stood there, no defenses up nor any spells being prepared. It was almost as if she was challenging Andrew to try and hurt her, so confident in her own power that she was certain she could withstand anything he – or any of the Kruna for that matter – could dish out. The more he tried to comprehend what was going on, the more everything seemed to be entirely out of place.

Spell, trick, whatever; I can beat her, I'm sure, Andrew thought, putting up his arms and angling his hands and legs. *I'll use the Gemivado to see if I can disrupt her energy flow. I can knock her unconscious as well if I put in enough energy, but I'll be careful not to expend myself too much.* He bolstered the power of the gathering darkness. A surreal humming emitted from between his hands as the density of the shadows increased. Once he felt he reached a sufficient charge, he unleashed his wave at the demon witch.

Even if I put all my energy into it, it's not like my attack would kill her, Andrew determined in his mind. *Nothing would kill her anyways; she's supposed to be immortal. Even so, she probably deserves to die. But if I kill her, I'm no better than she is... What's the morality of killing, anyways?*

Then something went horribly wrong. His Gemivado intensified against his will just before striking Marissa. The wave not only disrupted her energies but ravaged her body. Andrew's eyes shot wide open in shock. Succumbing to the awesome power of the shadows, the demon witch screamed in tormented terror as the life leaked out of her form. She fell to the floor, paler than ever, more still than a statue.

"NO!" Andrew yelled, rushing to the fallen demon witch. He knelt down and clutched her shoulders, trying to shake her awake. "Get up Marissa! Hey! I told you to get up, you stubborn old witch! I'm warning you – I'll bust into whatever afterlife you've gone to and pull you back out here myself!" Quivering in nervousness, Andrew yanked the limp body up and stared into her lifeless eyes. "You can't be dead – not this way! That wasn't me! I didn't put that much into that blast! There's no way!"

Andrew turned his head and saw Bowser's plasma beam incinerate Elkon just as Ramona's Photovado stabbed through Dry Bowser's skull like a javelin that was way too long. In the other direction, Neva stood over Popple's corpse and Daisy and Athelstan were both staring at their felled opponents. Just a few moments later, he witnessed Marut using his ninjato to rip into Necromancer's abdomen and Warra snap Vodyanoy's neck with the grooves of his axes, both of the Kruna surprised by the force and results of their respective moves. Watching the actions of all his teammates incited

a feeling of dread within Andrew. He did not expect such things from Kruna – any Kruna, especially not his friends. Every one of his comrades looked like merciless killing machines; the very things that Kruna were supposed to be against.

"Marissa, wake up!" Andrew pleaded. "Take an Ultra Mushroom and we'll do it over! Marissa!"

Nothing Andrew said could change what had already transpired. Marissa was dead, slain by the Kruna of Shadow. He gently laid the corpse down, a part of him inside now dead as well.

The battle was over.

The Kruna's eight opponents lay scattered around the field. All of them were dead, and none of the elemental wielders were sure how it had happened. They had not set out to kill any of their enemies, nor had the battle gone in any direction that warranted them to do so. It just...happened.

"We lost control," whimpered Ramona. "All of us totally lost it!"

"That wasn't me!" said Andrew. "A Kruna doesn't kill just to kill! If I have to kill somebody, regardless of who that person is, then at the very least can I do it knowing that there was no other alternative?"

"Where did we go wrong?" Daisy wondered aloud. "It all just seems like a blur now..."

"Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do, I guess," replied Neva.

"But none of us intended to do any of this!" growled Andrew.

"Maybe this is just a mistake as a result of inexperience?" suggested Marut.

"Yeah, *eight* mistakes because we don't know what we're doing," said Bowser.

"Maybe we really don't know what we're doing," Warra said under his breath. "Maybe we're the mistakes ourselves..."

"Okay, so we fouled up," muttered Athelstan. "It's fine. We're not perfect. We don't need to be perfect. Maybe we all did get a little overexcited without realizing it. Okay. We may get scrutinized for our carelessness here, but, there's nothing we can do about that now." He knelt down to try and inspect Necromancer's body. "We still don't have any explanation or understanding as to why – or even how – all these guys were even gathered together here in the first place. If we...wait, what?!"

Necromancer's body began to shimmer and fade. As it did so, another form was revealed from within. The sight stretched Athelstan's eyes wide open. "It's Toad!" he hollered. "Necromancer just turned into Toad!"

As Athelstan made his statement, the forms of the other fallen foes glowed and faded away to reveal the bodies of others. Popple transformed into Waluigi, Necropaladin into Wario, Dimentio into Geno, Vodyanoy into Luigi, Dry Bowser into Mario, Elkon into Peach, and Marissa into Rosalina. All eight were there, dead at the hands of the Kruna.

"Illusions," murmured Warra. "We fought illusions of enemies, past and present, never knowing that when we struck...we killed friends instead."

Andrew threw both of his Shadow Blades on the ground and stormed off. "Damn it all! We were tricked! We murdered them all without so much as a second thought! Someone knew we would be stupid enough to believe whatever caught our vision! Damn, were we all had!" In a fit or rage, he conjured a ball of shadow and hurled it at the ground in front of him, effectively hurting himself as a result of its splash damage.

"How can we trust our senses, or ourselves, or even each other, after this?" asked Warra. "If we can't tell a friend from an enemy, if can't control our own power, what use are we to the common good? We're nothing but massacres waiting to happen..."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Andrew snapped. "Give up? Hope some other team of Kruna gets the memo that there's a megalomaniac and a demon witch on the eastern hemisphere of the planet that need to be stopped? A lot of good that'll do everyone!"

Marut slumped down to the ground, staring into the distance at Culex's Chamber. "Andrew, how could we be so sure that we were doing anyone any good? What if we were tricked again...and we're all just a bunch of homicidal maniacs? What if we were menaces all along?"

"What if destiny chose the wrong wielders to be Kruna..." Ramona murmured, her voice incredibly weak.

"I don't know," Bowser just managed to whisper. He was especially stricken with grief. He just killed Peach, the princess who had been the object of his vendetta for years. In a very unsettling kind of way, he had finally succeeded in getting his long-sought vengeance. *But I don't want revenge,* he thought. *In the past, yes, but...not now. I didn't want this...*

An eerie, uncomfortable silence followed for what seemed like a timeless eternity. At no point before were any of them worried that their power might be too much to bear. After all, there were elemental wielders out there more powerful than they were. But that was like trying to compare the owner of a simple handgun to the owner of a Rocket-Propelled Bob-omb – they both had the potential to do serious damage if misused.

"I don't see what choice we have," said Warra. "If relying on our judgment leads to scenarios like this, and we don't have the control over the elements we thought we did, we can't even hope to be effective. We can't accomplish our mission, Daisy. We'll keep on our way to Culex's Chamber in the hopes that he'll be willing to change you back to normal, but after that, there's no way we can stand against King Sarasa or Marissa."

The Kruna of Earth did not answer. She kept looking at all the dead bodies scattered about and discarded like used tissues. When she spoke, tension filled her voice and exasperated her natural rasp. "Mario told me something once, not long after I first arrived in the

Mushroom Kingdom, and it was something that he was sure to tell most of the people he knew. He said that we all know that our time in this world is limited, but we just never know when we'll reach that limit, so we need to act like we don't have such a limit."

"Wait, so we need to act like we're immortal?" asked Bowser.

"Does that mean we have to act like we're a bunch of Marissas and King Sarasas?" asked Marut.

"We've gotten pretty close now, haven't we?" muttered Andrew.

"No!" Daisy replied. She looked around at her team. "Don't you guys get it? Mario and Luigi went on adventures and risked death every single day against all kinds of creatures. Despite whatever insecurities or fears they had, they kept striving for what was right. They knew something like this might happen – however unlikely they may have thought it was – but they kept on fighting anyway. They kept on fighting for the greater good against whatever or whoever presented a threat to it. Mario passed this philosophy on to everyone he could in the Mushroom Kingdom, and so they would all expect the same from us."

"Even after all this?" Ramona barely managed to ask.

"Especially after all this," Daisy replied. "Yes, we're not going to be the same people now that we've done this to them, but the least we can do is carry on what they believed in. So what if our records are tainted now? So what if we were never the kinds of role models they were? Screw everything else – I'm going on in honor of their memory and of all the Kruna that preceded us and that are to come! Now are you all going to join me?"

One by one, Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, Andrew, and Neva all stepped forward. Though motivated to continue with their efforts against King Sarasa and Marissa, they were all still fairly shaken. Their grim expressions and angsty body language were not lost on Daisy, making it evident to her that they shared the same kind of brooding, turbulent thoughts she had been trying to ignore and pay no mind to. Even so, they all asserted their determination to see their mission through to the end, whatever that may mean or

lead to.

"We've all had quite the shoddy showing here in Sarasaland, haven't we?" asked Ramona.

"It has been a pretty poor performance on our part," said Bowser.

"We really haven't fared too well here at all, to put it lightly," said Neva.

Daisy nodded. "We have have a pretty bad run here, and things just haven't gone our way very much at all. But, that doesn't mean we can't change that. We've got time; not a lot, but, we've got enough to turn things around here."

"Let's hope so..." Warra murmured, sighing.

With a last look at the corpses of Mario, Luigi, Peach, Toad, Wario, Waluigi, Rosalina, and Geno, the Kruna turned to head for the bridge leading to the next plot of land. They had only taken a handful of steps when Bowser paused to look back. What he saw – or rather, what he didn't see – stunned him.

"They're gone!" Bowser exclaimed. "All of them! They've disappeared!"

The Kruna all turned around to see that the battlefield was clear. There was no sign of Mario, Peach, or any of the others.

"We only had our backs turned for a few seconds," said Warra. "What could have happened to them?"

"I don't know," said Marut. "You guys ever play a video game where the dead bodies just sorta randomly disappear after a while?"

"That would make sense," muttered Bowser. "That is, except for the fact that we're not in a game! If this was a game, I'd have to ask the developers what the hell they were thinking putting us through all the crap we've had to go through in the past two weeks and counting!"

"You're all missing a better question," stated Neva. "What if those guys we just killed were never actually here at all?"

Warra perked up. "She's onto something! Didn't you all notice that none of them said a *single* word? Not even a comprehensible syllable?"

Neva shrugged. "Actually, I noticed a lack of blood spill inconsistent with what we did to them. And now that I think of it, there wasn't any loss of blood that I could notice!"

"And no blood means that we couldn't have been fighting them!" concluded Athelstan.

"So they're all still alive!" added Ramona.

"Better yet, what would they even be doing here in the first place?" asked Bowser, relief easing its way into his voice. "And why would they be attacking us? And notice how there's no trace of any bodies now? They were all just illusions!"

"Those were some pretty good illusions," Andrew muttered. Then he added with a smirk, "I need to learn how to make my illusions fight back and actually hurt."

The grief and anger shared among the group of elemental wielders faded, now replaced with laughter. A disaster averted, the Kruna all felt a huge burden lifted from their shoulders. But they could not rest easy yet. The revelation did not make their mission in Sarasaland any easier, nor did it erase the reality of their string of dismal performances. With all that in mind, they maintained their focus on the task at hand. They still had to make their way to Culex's Chamber, and at this point, anything could happen before they reached the fabled Dark Knight.

Chapter XXXI

Culex Awaits :

King Sarasa was getting impatient as he sat on the stool. "Are you quite finished yet?" he grumbled at the doctor and the scientist beside him. "Time is of the essence. Every second is crucial and must be savored, especially in the case of this!"

They were in the underground medical center of the Central Castle, a section of the complex off limits to unauthorized personnel. King Sarasa made sure that only his finest, most trusted workers were allowed access inside, for what he had planned for development within was too important to risk unnecessary interference. It had been a handful of weeks since he had made a trip down there himself, and it was his intention for this day to be the final time he had to come down.

The scientist walked in with a tray of four test tubes and beakers in one arm, and an equal amount of syringes in the hand of her other arm. The doctor followed closely behind to monitor both the administration of the contents into the king and the condition of the king's vitals.

"I will say it again, king," the scientist murmured. "What we have combined here in various amounts are eight substances known to be illegal in much of the world. Are you sure you want to continue?"

"We've tried conservative approaches for years now," King Sarasa replied. "Nothing has worked. I can still feel the aging process occurring within me. The difference in my body between this year and last year is apparent."

"King," the doctor said, flipping through his clipboard. "What we've given you so far has retained almost all of your youth and vigor from your early twenties, and now two decades later, you're able to run circles around people your age! You'll probably have another century of life at the very least at this rate! Can you not be content with that?"

" *At least* , another century, you say," King Sarasa grumbled. " *At least* another hundred centuries, I say. At least a limitless amount of centuries is the goal. We have not reached the goal. I've been on this planet for forty-five years. My body still ages. Before I start a crippling decline, I must eradicate the aging process entirely, preserving both my youth and my life. No, I'm not content with another century. If you are, then treat yourself to those past serums that did not perform to my standards." He took off his large orange jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt, and added with irritation, "I don't care what it is that you put in me – I just need it to work for what I want it to do!"

The scientist and doctor both exchanged hesitant looks, but they knew that nothing they could say or do would make King Sarasa reconsider. With a sigh, the scientist put down the test tubes and got one of her syringes ready. King Sarasa held out his arms for the doctor to sterilize, and then waited for the injections.

Crossing over the third bridge gave the Kruna time to reflect on their journey so far. They had less than two weeks before the Blood Moon would rise, and Geno said that they would all need at least as long to get ready for the battle to come. Bowser was concerned about what Rosalina had said regarding Mario and Luigi. With the two renowned fire and air wielders off on a mission, that meant that the Mushroom Kingdom was left relatively unguarded. The haste that Rosalina showed was even more disconcerting. What could those two possibly be up to that held such urgency? Being on the other half of the world, the Kruna of Fire knew there was nothing he could do but hope for the best for the crew out west. Focus had to be put on the task at hand. There was a demon witch to deal with on one side, a despotic king on the other, and Kokoro on yet another. *At this rate, we'll be running out of sides,* Bowser thought. *It'll be like an eight-sided fight or some other ludicrous scenario...*

Warra was worried about running into a trap, and Athelstan was trying to think of creative ways to use his Pendant of Strength. Marut was lost in thought, thinking about his parents that he never had a chance to see and replaying the image of his dead uncle in a hospital bed. It only served to agitate him and make him anxious.

Thoughts of self-inadequacy ran through the minds of both Andrew and Ramona, while Neva was trying to grapple with the very concept of Culex.

For as much of a threat Kokoro posed, Daisy was not concerned with where he ran off to. She kept her focus locked on getting to Culex and then getting back to Geno so they could prepare for the battle with Marissa. Depending on how that clash turned out, then that would likely mean she'd have to face her father afterwards. *I'd have to do it eventually,* she thought. *But what if I face him* before *facing Marissa? What if I were somehow able to get him on our side so we can team up and defeat her? Is he so far lost in his ways that he can't...change?*

The musings of the group were interrupted after they reached the end of the third bridge and stepped foot on the next portion of solid ground. The moment they marched near the center, a large firestorm erupted from the air and rained down to surround the entire chunk of land. The fires were thick enough to nearly obscure their view of their destination.

"Oh, this is great," Neva muttered. "We haven't had to fight for our lives against an inferno for at least twelve hours now."

Swarms of Fire Neckies swooped down from several sides of the wall of flames, performing aerial acrobatics as they encircled the elemental wielders. The birds continued putting on a show for several moments, but none of them made any attacks. Still, the Kruna had to get past the fire to continue towards Culex's Chamber, so they readied their energies and poised themselves for attack. Unfortunately, their hostile maneuvers threw the Fire Neckies into a frenzied fritz and provoked them into attack. The birds increased their flying speed and soared around to prepare an assault on the Kruna in all directions.

"Hey! Get back, you flaming fools!" a very feminine voice called out.

As swiftly as the swirling dome of fire had come to be, it blew away and withered into the ether. The Fire Neckies scattered and flew off into the distance with great haste. From where the other bridge joined the plot of land, a pink dinosaur-like creature in red armor, a

crimson shirt, black pants, and a black metal headband with a red ribbon bow marched towards the Kruna. In her hands, she held a two-handed Torch Guisarme with a massive blade piece covered in fire. Attached to the side of one of her shoulders was a large diamond shield that ran the length of her upper arm to just up below the top of her head.

"I am Birdo," the figure said. "I guard Culex's Chamber. You shall not pass."

"How cliché of you," Bowser snapped. "We've run into a gatekeeper, and on top of that, she said-"

Birdo twirled her guisarme like a flag and then pointed it at Bowser, firing off a bolt of fire that just clipped the koopa's shoulder. Knocked off balance, the Kruna of Fire stumbled around for a bit before managing to regain his stance.

"You shall not pass," Birdo repeated.

Athelstan pulled back and slammed his foot into the ground. Birdo knew what was coming, but did not react quick enough. She was launched airborne by the sudden jolt from the ground beneath her.

"My name is Athelstan," grumbled the brown-clothed Kruna. "My world is sand and stone."

"How come I never see you use any power-based attacks?" Bowser asked the stone wielder.

"Stone energy blasts are notoriously weak," Athelstan replied. "We stone wielders generally just avoid using them unless in tandem with another element, like that final blast we used against Elkon." He paused for a moment, watching Birdo execute a few flips as she maneuvered herself to a soft landing. "I'm fine with it though. There's something special about taking a giant boulder and smacking somebody upside the head with it."

"That's too bad," Birdo replied. "I'm not going to give you the opportunity to do so." She shot a flaming egg from her large snout into her hand and chucked it right at the center of the group.

Something about that egg made Bowser scream, "DODGE!" All eight of the elemental wielders split and dove away from the incoming projectile. Once the egg made contact with the ground, it exploded and sent flames up into the air of its surprisingly wide blast radius.

"Good call, Bowser!" Daisy shouted.

"I don't understand!" Ramona cried, scrambling to her feet. "First you ward off those Fire Neckies, but now you're fighting us? Why?"

"The Fire Neckies are just beasts," Birdo replied. "They do not kill for reason – they merely kill. They have no understanding, respect, or love for their enemies. I let them have their way with whatever wildlife meanders over here, but those with heart and honor are mine to demolish." She started twirling her guisarme again in a simliar fashion to earlier, although this time with more ferocity. Taking a spread, wide grip on her tool, she knelt down and jammed the blunt end into the ground, kicking up fire on the opposite side where the blade was and encasing it in opaque flames. "Surrender and turn back, or stay and die for trespassing on hallowed grounds. Either way, this is as far as you go. No further."

"Another threat," Daisy muttered. "Is there anyone in this damn nation who doesn't make threats?"

"As long as your dad's around, I don't think so," Neva remarked. She turned to Birdo, adding, "And this is just insanity! How can some mythical Dark Knight have such significance – and here of all places?"

"If you do not understand Culex, or you question his existence, then why are you here?" Birdo asked. Raising her tool, she flared more fire around the blade and made a sweeping horizontal slash. Her wave of flames had substantial range, covering nearly two-thirds of the plot of land they stood on. Neva, Warra, and Marut countered with their tools, deflecting most of the flames. The second wave of fire was already well on its way, but Bowser, Ramona, and Andrew stepped up to defend and deflect in time. Neva shot off four ice arrows, only for Birdo to crouch and angle her body so that her shoulder shield could not only block but shatter the ice on contact.

With yet another series of twirls, the pink dino slammed her guisarme down on the ground, kicking up fire as if someone had blown a fan on the beach. Her wild yet graceful control of fire elicited amazement within Bowser and Andrew. With minimal effort, Birdo had created a firestorm on the entire plot of land that would make an elite fire wielder envious. Everywhere they looked, torches, wisps, heat, embers, sparks; all flared in waves and walls of primal abundance. To Daisy, it was as if fire itself had gone mad with Birdo's presence and looked to consume the world around them.

Birdo's mastery over fire is evident, Daisy thought. *Far more evident than any of our elemental control. To think, she's willing all of this to be...*

Athelstan brought up portions of the rocky ground in front of his teammates to shield against the now aggressive flames. Daisy pulled from some of the earth packed between the rocks and sent it over Athelstan's projections in an attempt to pummel Birdo, but the dino was already in motion and had an easy time evading. Birdo dashed towards each of the stony projections and smashed them to pieces with her guisarme, igniting even more fire with each swing.

"The amount of fire she's sending out is phenomenal!" Daisy exclaimed in awe.

"She must be pulling it out of her socks when we're not looking," Andrew muttered.

Athelstan frowned. "But she's barefoot!"

Before anyone had any time to react, another great burst of fire took up the scenery. From the flames Birdo leapt, looking to slam her guisarme down on Neva's skull. A mound of dirt and mud from Daisy brushed by Birdo and disrupted her momentum. The dino touched a foot down and backtracked with several haphazard leaps, but she went back to twirling her tool in just seconds.

"Gee, I've been saved by Daisy," said Neva. "How swell!"

"If that dino does any more of that spinning bit, I'm gonna get dizzy," Ramona mumbled.

As if in response, Birdo twirled her guisarme with more complexity and unpredictability. The heightened fierceness of her movements served to add even more fire to her tool, fire that erupted like a phoenix at the eight elemental wielders. A combined effort from the powers of Bowser, Warra, Marut, Ramona, and Neva blocked the incoming blast of flames. Birdo gathered more energy in preparation for her next attack, intent on shuttling more power once she saw her eight opponents still standing.

"Just one!" Bowser screamed. "That's it! There's eight of us and only one of her! How have we not put this away yet?" He breathed a burst of fire from his mouth, only for Birdo to twist around and deflect it into the ground with her shoulder shield.

"Something's wrong," said Daisy. "How is Birdo so powerful? She's rivaling Kokoro at this point!"

Birdo retaliated by hurling three flaming eggs in succession up in the air, but Marut reacted quick. He brought in a gust to cut through and push the eggs out into the water. The idea then came to Bowser's mind for a possible counter attack.

Luckily for Bowser, Marut must have figured it out as well. When Birdo sent a swath of five fiery eggs at the Kruna, Marut repeated his previous tactic, but this time in a way that angled the wind so that the eggs crashed on and around the dino. The shock from the attack and the energy loss from withstanding the flames caused Birdo to momentarily collapse.

"Why you bunch of ungraceful maggots..." Birdo griped.

"Quick!" Warra yelled. "Make a break for the bridge while she's down! Waste no time!"

"Don't you think about running!" screamed Birdo. She lifted up her snout and shot out five more of her flaming eggs, only for Marut to blow down another gust and for Bowser to let loose a burst of his own fire to add to the potency of the eggs. Again, Birdo got blitzed, adding to her distress and further stunning her.

"My own attack...twice..." Birdo hissed. "When I get back up... When

I get my hands on you all..."

"Go for the bridge now!" Athelstan yelled at the team.

"What're ya waiting for?" Marut ecstatically said to Ramona. He slapped her on the back to get her moving towards the bridge but almost knocked her off her feet in the process.

"Wait a minute – we're not running from her!" Daisy barked. "Stand your ground, all of you, and let's finish this! It's not over yet!"

"Close enough!" Warra shot back, pushing Daisy to the bridge.

The Kruna of Earth shook her head and sighed, but didn't argue and just went along with it. *I guess the less time spent here, the better,* she thought. *And beating Birdo would eat up way too much time. But still, this doesn't sit well with me.*

The team made their way onto the fourth of the bridges with great haste. Strangely enough however, the moment Daisy and Neva decided to look back, Birdo had vanished. They frowned, wondering what was going on with all of the obscure, cryptic occurrences that had been taking place since they had started down the peninsula. Neva seemed especially disturbed. None of it made any sense to the ice wielder, and the more she thought about it, the more skeptical she became of Culex's powers and of his existence.

The team of eight kept up their pace until they made it to the next column of land, where they were abruptly cut off by a flash of light. A thick wall of mystical energy came down and blocked the beginning of the final bridge, though its origin was unknown and seemed to have spawned from thin air. The Kruna advanced towards the center of the plot of land, cautious and alert for whoever – or whatever – was watching them.

"Welcome, travelers," a deep voice bellowed from every direction. None of the Kruna saw a single being, nor could any of them sense any energy signature. "You must all seek Culex's Chamber to have made it this far..."

"That's right!" shouted Daisy. "Now come out where we can see

you!"

"Don't try to fight 'nothing,' Daisy," muttered Bowser.

The voice ignored the Kruna of Earth. "Culex resides in the chamber ahead where the gateway to an alternate dimension exists through his power and his alone. Outsiders of this world are forbidden from entering this alternate dimension, just as those from there are forbidden to trespass here. The gateway is only Culex's to enter and exit. Travelers can not be trusted inside of his chamber unless they are willing to prove themselves, though Culex is both wonderful and terrible in his might. The price to converse with Culex is high; no negotiations allowed."

"Alright, so how many coins does everyone have?" Marut asked. "I've got almost a hundred."

"The eight of you stand ready and direct attention nowhere else but here," the voice demanded. "If you wish to pass to the entrance of Culex's Chamber, one of you must die. Make your decision. Now."

"Why don't you come out and fight one of us instead?" Daisy yelled. "What are ya – scared?"

"If you wish to pass to the entrance of Culex's Chamber, one of you must die," The voice said again with the exact same tone. "Make your decision. Now."

"Alright! We heard you the first time!" Neva snapped.

"I bet we're just talking to a recording," said Andrew.

"Oh, screw this!" Bowser growled, raising a hand at the wall of magic. He breathed a burst of fire at it, but to no avail. The magical barrier held up strong. In fact, none of the other elemental wielders were able to elicit any effect on the mystic wall themselves either.

"We'll just go back," Warra said. "We'll find another way around, or we'll get creative and make one."

The Kruna of Water turned around just in time to see another mystic wall erect in front of the bridge they had just got off of. Before he

could even entertain the possibility of taking a plunge into the waters below, slabs of the ground beneath them shot up to the sky to erect a barrier that encircled the whole column of land. For some reason, neither Athelstan nor Daisy could exert any will over the newly formed obstruction of earth and stone when they tried shifting it back down. A mystic force field formed overhead to cage the Kruna in and effectively trap them in all directions.

"Two choices have you," the voice said. "Either you can leave Watcher's Cape, never to return, or choose one of your number to die so that the rest may pass. You have no other options."

A few moments of dead silence passed. The voice was not kidding in any way, and for a while, nothing happened. Since no one spoke up about turning back, the voice waited on a sacrifice from the team and did not say anything more.

Daisy was about to volunteer as the sacrifice, but then she remembered how close she had come to killing herself. *That was just a decade ago,* she thought. *And I was only twelve! It would make sense for me to sacrifice myself here, but then again, the only reason we came here was for me! Maybe we should all just turn back. I mean, I don't really mind being in this body anymore. And there's gotta be another way to return to normal, somehow. If it means everyone stays safe and alive, then we can turn back and be done with this place!* She looked around, noticing that everyone else was just as lost in thought as her. *But they don't want to turn back, do they?*

"I volunteer," said Andrew, stepping forward. "If someone has to die, then it will be me."

"Andrew? No!" cried Ramona.

"Absolutely not," said Bowser, taken aback with surprise by the shadow wielder's assertion. He addressed the unknown voice, saying, "Whoever you are, this is not our choice, and it most certainly is not your choice! The power to decide who lives or not does not reside in any of our hands!"

"Yeah; whoever you are, you need to back off!" Athelstan added.

"We've gotten too used to having Sturdy Shady around here to let him go!"

Andrew's mind flashed back to the vision that Marissa had shared with him. Although the Kruna of Shadow did mention to the team that he had an encounter with the demon witch at Chai City, he never brought up the vision she showed him. It was a haunting image that had too many ramifications to consider at the moment, regardless of whether it was just an alternate reality or if it had actually happened instead of what did. It didn't help that he began thinking about how poorly he did against Elkon, Deyanira, and *twice* against King Boo.

"Please, you guys," Andrew said. "This is the best choice. In my eyes, this is the obvious choice. Let me die so that you all can live. I've never cared about whether I was alive or not. If I'm alive, great. If I'm not, oh well. And now, I guess it's time for me to not be alive. I'm not an elite shadow wielder. I wonder if I'm even in 'very good' territory."

"To hell with all that!" growled Daisy. "Yeah, maybe we're not the best at what we do! Fine! But who cares? We make a difference when it matters, Andrew! Don't use your abilities as the barometer of your self-worth!"

"Please, Andrew; please reconsider," Ramona said.

"We all made it here together!" yelled Bowser. "And we're all gonna make it out together! It's that simple! No more instances like Grekka! No more needless deaths! I've seen enough needless deaths already! Far more than I needed to!"

Andrew shook his head and smiled. "Look, if it means getting you guys ahead, then I'm glad to do this for you all."

"The choice has been made," the voice said, ending the exchange among the Kruna. "The price will be paid."

"What? No!" Athelstan shouted. "That was way too quick!"

"Hold on!" Ramona snapped. "We didn't get enough say in the

matter-"

A beam of light shone down from the ceiling above, smothering Andrew in his entirety. His body broke apart and disintegrated before fading away into the ether. As his body went, his energy signature dropped off until none of the elemental wielders could sense him anymore. In under a minute, he was gone.

Several moments of quiet followed, disturbed only by Ramona's muffled sobbing. Marut had slumped to the ground, while Warra stared at his fists, wishing he had volunteered himself sooner. Bowser and Athelstan were absolutely livid, and the shock on Daisy's and Neva's faces told the whole story. With all the battles they had engaged in, they had all managed to survive them, including the ones they engaged in on their way to Culex's Chamber and the overwhelming inferno that burnt down Chai City. Now, in mere minutes and with no conflict involved whatsoever, the Kruna were down one person.

"How did this happen...?" Ramona barely managed to say. "How does something like this happen?"

"This...this is all kinds of wrong..." Marut mumbled.

"That wasn't necessary, you stupid, dumb shadow wielder," Neva muttered, pale and quivering in place.

"It's my fault, you guys," Daisy said. Tension in and over her eyes, she pressed a clawed hand on her forehead and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry...to all of you. I take full blame for this. We should've never came here in the first place..."

Suddenly, a swirling of matter and aura took place within the beam of light where Andrew once stood. As it rotated, it coalesced itself into a definite shape. More matter and more energy began shuttling into the now growing figure. The elemental wielders all looked on as they saw Andrew rematerialize and reform right before their eyes, his body whole and as it was before, as if nothing had ever happened. The light around the Kruna of Shadow disappeared once the process was complete. He glanced around in confusion, obviously just as surprised as all the others.

"It has been done," the voice said. "The shadow wielder before you has died and been revived. The price has been paid. The conditions have been met. For the cold reality of death itself is not important; only the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the greater cause. This one had the courage to accept destruction so that his comrades could live on and continue, so final death will not be his to experience today."

All the barriers around the Kruna receded and faded away, rendering the column of land the exact way it was when they had initially stepped foot on it. Still, the origin of the voice remained unknown.

"You are all free to pass on," the voice said.

The Kruna and Neva hurried on towards the start of the final bridge, none of them wanting to take any chances by sticking around on that previous plot of land. Words of relief and assurance were exchanged, lifting the general morale among the group. Everyone on the team expressed gratefulness for having Andrew still with them, though the experience and circumstances surrounding it rattled and perturbed them more than they realized.

Chapter XXXII

Chamber of the Dark Knight :

The Kruna and Neva stepped off the final bridge, arriving at the entrance to Culex's Chamber. Neva looked inside of the mountain and saw nothing but lightstones and bioluminescent crystals. With a little extra effort, she caught a glimpse of a rotating portal within, but did not notice any sign of any detectable intelligent being.

"Ramona, Andrew," said Daisy. "This would be a good reference point to take note of."

"Doubtful," Andrew replied. "If we couldn't bridge here directly the first time, what makes you think we'd be able to do it in the future?"

"Or even now for that matter," added Ramona.

"I don't know," Daisy responded. "But just try anyways and see what happens."

Ramona and Andrew stood together and focused their energies, forming the links with their current location and with an area in Sarasa Field near Castle Town. To their surprise, the portal opened above just as any other portal they had done in the past.

"We stand corrected," said Ramona. The two disbanded their portal, though it seemed why they were unable to bridge with their current location earlier would remain a mystery.

"I'm startin' to wonder if this whole 'Culex' thing is just a load of mythical crap," Neva muttered.

"Well, let's walk in the unhappy mountain and find out," said Bowser.

Neva arched her back and puffed her chest out at the koopa as she sprung up on her toes. "Are you talkin' down to me?"

"Aren't we all?" asked Marut. "You're the smallest one here." His

remark garnered a painful stomp on his foot from the ice wielder. "OWW!"

"Not here, you two!" snapped Daisy. "Do you guys mind?"

The eight elemental wielders marched through the mouth of the mountain, the entrance to Culex's Chamber. A mixture of red, blue, and purple hues glowed within and all around. The portal that led to the alternate dimension was now more obvious, and right next to the portal appeared to be some sort of a makeshift throne, but still, Culex was nowhere to be found.

"So *this* is Culex," said Neva. "Gee, he's so grand and so magnificent, it's almost like he's not even here!"

"Don't be so quick to judge, Neva," Warra said. He turned to address the empty chair. "We're sorry to disturb you, noble Culex, but our duty requires that we ask a great favor of you."

They stood for several moments with baited breath, waiting for something to happen. The chamber remained unchanged from the moment they entered. Neva frowned, turning bitter as she thought through all that they had endured through Watcher's Cape to get to this very chamber.

"O-kay," Neva muttered. "May I be judgmental now?"

As if giving an answer, a being began to take shape in front of the throne. The entity carried a substantial energy signature that seemed to reflect not one element, but *all eight* .

A smiling Warra turned to Neva, saying, "Yes."

The growing figure took form as a vampiric saint in a purple and black body in possession of red wings and a torso tapering into a large vortex of colorless crystals. Eight other larger, seemingly sentient crystals – one of different color for each element – surrounded Culex and pulsated with energy. Clad in asymmetrical, gunmetal armor, he hovered in the air and looked upon the eight elemental wielders before him not with happiness or anger, but with a piercing melancholy that seemed to reflect the state of the world.

In any case, Culex was a marvelous being to behold.

"Awesome," said Daisy.

"Impressive," remarked Bowser.

"Scary," Ramona mumbled.

"He's not scary!" Marut exclaimed.

Andrew glanced at the Kruna of Air and cocked an eyebrow. "Then why are your legs shaking?"

"Because we've been on our feet for close to four hours now!" Marut snapped, flailing his arms. "And Neva's stomp really hurt..."

"State your premise for coming here," Culex said. His voice was sharp and metallic.

The bestial Kruna of Earth stepped forward to tell of Marissa, King Sarasa, Kokoro, and her transformation by the aforementioned demon witch. She did not mince any words as she did so, and Bowser, Neva, and Warra all helped to address whatever gaps needed to be filled. Culex listened to it all and gave them all the time they needed, never rushing them and never expressing disinterest, but not expressing much intrigue either.

"...All of which lead to our coming here," Daisy finished. "I would ask for you to change me back, but I would also like to ask this question first; would you be willing to help us against Marissa Arkana and my dad?"

Culex did not move or bat an eye as he replied, "No."

"What do you mean 'no?' " Marut asked. "As powerful and mighty as you are and you're not gonna help us against either one of them?!"

"You all do appear to be Kruna, but immature ones at best," said Culex. "Definitely not impressive compared to those of the past. Because of that alone, I would lend my aid since you seem to need it. However, the coming battle appears to be your destiny to participate in, not mine. I will change you back to your normal self,

Kruna of Earth, but I will not provide any further favors."

"Okay," Daisy replied, sighing but nodding. "That's fine. Either way, we are all grateful for your influence-"

"I am not finished, Kruna of Earth," Culex quickly said. "I will change you back to your normal self *if* any of you can answer this riddle for me."

Daisy looked at all of her friends in turn before answering, "Alright. What do ya got for us?"

"What time will the sun rise tomorrow?" Culex asked.

Neva broke out in laughter. "That's funny."

"What's so funny?" Culex asked. "You said that as if you were certain when it would rise; you said it as if you were certain it would rise at all tomorrow. So let me ask you this; will the sun rise tomorrow?"

"Yeah...it will," Neva replied, somewhat bewildered.

"How are you so sure?" Culex flatly asked.

"Wait, what do you mean?" Neva asked.

"How are you so sure that the sun will rise tomorrow?" Culex questioned again, tone unchanged.

"Well, because it always has," Neva answered, confused.

"So?" Culex replied. "You're saying that because the sun has always risen in the past, it will rise tomorrow?"

"This is ridiculous," Bowser said. "What kind of question is this?"

"The sun's supposed to rise!" Athelstan exclaimed. "You know, it's all science and stuff for the planet to rotate and orbit the sun."

Culex nodded. "What is science?" Except for Daisy, Ramona, and Andrew, the Dark Knight's remark made all the other elemental

wielders flop over on their faces.

"Well, it's the study of the structure and behavior of our physical world!" Athelstan asserted, snapping back to his feet. "It's how we get our laws and general understanding of how the universe works."

"Yes, interesting," Culex replied, holding his face in his left hand. "And how do you get these 'laws' you speak of?"

"Somebody help me," Neva muttered. "Andrew, you better hold me back."

"Scientists establish these laws through experiments and other observations," Athelstan said. "They're these trends, these irrevocable truths that have been tested many times over and proven time and time again to be true."

"So these 'irrevocable truths' and 'laws' are considered valid and sound because they have been tested and observed?" Culex asked.

"Yeah, and they describe what will happen when certain things are done," Athelstan replied. "Like gravity is a constant force that keeps us grounded to our planet. That's physics to be precise, a branch of science."

"Okay," Culex said. "So what will happen if you wake up tomorrow to find that all of a sudden, gravity is reversed, and instead of everything being grounded and falling down, everything is detached and falling up?"

"That just can't happen!" Warra exclaimed. "Gravity has always been a constant and always will be a constant."

"So because gravity has always *been* a constant, you're just going to assume that it will always be the same?" Culex said. "You're going to assume that in the future, everything will always fall at a rate of 9.8 meters per second squared because it has done so in the past?"

"Well, yes!" Neva responded. "All other variables aside, everything falls at that very rate!"

Culex nodded. "So if I were to take a rock and drop it outside of the window here, it will fall down at a rate of 9.8 meters per second squared? If I were to jump out the window right now, I would fall down at a rate of 9.8 meters per second squared?"

"Yes!" Neva yelled. "It's been proven to happen too many times to count already!"

"Yes, but that's exactly what I'm asking about," replied Culex. "So because you have found that such an object has always been associated with a certain event, you're asserting that every instance through which that object operates will elicit the same event? Because gravity has always worked on everything in the past, it will always continue to work no matter what? You're trying to use observed phenomena from the past to prove unobserved phenomena in the future when the future hasn't even happened yet? If you haven't observed the future, how can you prove with science that events will happen if the sciences dictate that events have to be observed to be proven? On what premise are you establishing the argument that in the future, near or distant, something is going to happen just because it has happened before?"

"Because I have not been given any other reason to think otherwise!" Neva shouted, turning red. "If everything that has happened before in the last several billion years or so has proven to have a perfect success rate, how can one not be certain that such events, phenomena, and causalities will not continue? Why would gravity suddenly turn off?"

"Why wouldn't it?" asked Culex. "It's not inconceivable, is it? It's not incomprehensible, is it? You can quite easily imagine anyone jumping out the window, resistant to gravity! You can quite easily imagine me letting go of a rock and it falling upwards! You're making your claims through inductive reasoning; through identifying the patterns of causes and effects to make inferences on what truth is."

"And just how is inductive reasoning not reliable?" Neva asked.

"I'm not saying that it isn't," Culex replied. "But situationally speaking, it is not reliable for truths. You'll find that everyone on this planet uses inductive reasoning much more frequently than other

methods of reasoning. It is how we are able to form our beliefs. These beliefs can be shaped and morphed in any way we see fit, because they are what we accept as truth, regardless of if it is or not. If I have four pears and five apples, can you imagine me having six pieces of fruit in total? No, because then I would have nine pieces of fruit altogether. That is an undeniable truth. Can you imagine a square circle? You can't, because in order for a shape to be a square, it must have sides, and yet, a shape must be devoid of sides to be considered a circle. These necessary truths among others are ideas whose denial is inconceivable or contradictory, therefore proving to be true no matter how the world turns out. These are things we don't need to go out and observe or gather evidence for. If gravity were to suddenly invert and propel everything away from the planet's core, a square would still be a four-sided equilateral figure, and three plus six would still equal nine. All you would have to do is understand these necessary truths to know them and to be able to recognize them as just that – truth, and therefore, logically sound."

"This is all making a lot of sense, Neva," said Daisy. "Don't try to argue with him."

"And that's where you're wrong!" Neva snapped. "He's making no sense at all! He's screwing with us!"

"I don't think he is," Andrew said. "I think he's making a lot of sense, Neva. Let's just hear him out."

Culex held up both of his hands. "If I have seven rings on my fingers and am standing in the middle of the street where I am hit by a bus, it is logically impossible to say that I have anything more or less than seven rings on my fingers, *but* it is logically possible to say that the bus can run into me, bounce off of me, go hurtling into the sky, do a triple backflip, and then softly land on the ground ten feet away from me while I watch, unharmed. You can imagine and conceive that exact event between me and the bus and nothing contradicts. You can say that it breaks several laws of science, but what is science but a collection of beliefs extrapolated onto everyday life?"

"But isn't science based on math, a necessary truth?" Athelstan asked. "That would mean science in and of itself is a necessary truth

as well!"

"Using science is nothing more than using inductive arguments to explain a perceived uniformity of nature," the Dark Knight responded. "Are you sure science is based on math? Or rather, is math used to justify beliefs that were created on observations and experiments that were made through experience rather than through logical deduction? You're assuming that the regularity of gravity in its current state will continue to exist into the future because it has done so throughout the past. Sure, gravity may pull everything down at this very moment, but if at any point in time for whatever reason – if any, at all – gravity were to change, then the math for it would have to change."

"Okay, how about this," Daisy began, intrigued. "When for example, I put my hands near a fire, something that I know is always blazing at a high temperature, I can feel the heat radiating onto my hands. I have always been able to tell that fires have been hot just by knowing that it has always felt hot every other time I put my hands around it."

"So in your perception, in the relays of your senses, all fires that you have observed have been hot, correct?" Culex asked.

"Yes," Daisy replied.

"Then using that statement, you come to the idea that all fires that you have not observed are hot, correct?"

"Yes."

"But how can you if you have not observed all the fires that have been in existence when you have to have made the observations in the first place in order to make your claim?"

"Why does she need to have observed every single fire in order to know that all fires are hot?" Neva snapped. "We'd all know by sticking our hands in a fire and burning them!"

"Because otherwise, you won't know!" Culex replied. "Let's say you did stick your hands in a fire and the fire burned your hands since

the fire was, in fact, hot; but which fire? When? What if you stuck your hands in a particular fire and nothing happened? What about any fire that has yet to come into existence? When you're trying to say that because A happened, B will always happen, you're saying that there's a sort of, necessary connection, in which whenever A happens, B happens in the past, present, and future regardless of anything else, but have you actually experienced the future? You're implicitly assuming that the future will resemble the past; that all fires will be hot, that gravity will always work, that the sun will always rise, and so on, so forth. Why then, should we believe that the future will resemble the past when it's easily conceivable to say that the future will fail to resemble the past? If that's the case, then nothing can suggest that you will fall to the ground if you all were to jump out a window, nor should anything be able to determine that your hands won't freeze the next time you place them near a fire. An elephant could appear right next to me in the next ten seconds out of thin air, and there's no argument that could be made to say that that's logically impossible. Hence, I go back to my original question; how do you know that the sun will rise tomorrow?"

"My brain hurts!" Marut cried.

Culex continued speaking. "The only justification you are able to give for the sun rising tomorrow is because of the fact that the sun has risen every day prior to now, but do you really know if the sun will indeed rise tomorrow or are you just assuming based on the fact that in the past, the future has resembled the past?"

Athelstan started scratching the side of his head. "If the future has resembled the past in the past then why wouldn't the future continue to resemble the past in the future?"

"So now, you're saying that in the future, the future will resemble the past," replied Culex. "But in order for the future to resemble the past, the future must resemble the past! That would work if we already knew that the future will indeed resemble the past, but we don't. Past futures resembling past pasts have nothing to do with present futures resembling past pasts; it's a circular argument. In fact, if you look at induction itself to determine whether induction will give reliable beliefs about the future, you trap yourself in another circular argument. There is therefore nothing that logically determines that

gravity pulls everything down, fires burn, or that the sun rises everyday. You are inferring that all these things happen without reason to believe that they will continue to happen. I would go so far as to say that any claim made that says that any point in time resembles another would be saying that time is constant. In that case, there would be no past, present, or future. Can you really imagine what it would be like if we took away the 'time' aspect of our universe? That would mean every experience, event, and effect in our universe would all happen simultaneously! Can you conceive *everything* happening at once? Can *any being* , who is bound by time and space as we are in this realm?"

"I...don't think I can..." Neva murmured.

"None of us," Daisy added.

Bowser's eyes beamed wide open. *That's it!* he thought. *Marissa's Malocchio Eye! Since no being can conceive* everything *at once, then her Malocchio Eye can't either! Its Remote Viewing has its limits right there!* He looked at Warra, who nodded at him. The Kruna of Water had come to the same conclusion as well.

"When you experience the future, it's not the future anymore – it's the present," Culex said. "And then the present becomes the past. In fact, the moment you take note of your present point in time, that point in time instantly becomes a past occurrence. With that said, you will never reach the future because the future will then be the present once you reach it, and then just as quickly become the past! So again, how can you determine something about the future based on past observations and experiments or tests when you need to observe, experiment, or experience something in order to prove its truth even though you will never be able to observe, experiment, or experience the future? The moment we reach tomorrow, it's no longer tomorrow – it's today, and today's today becomes yesterday. We will never know if the sun will rise tomorrow until tomorrow becomes today and we then are able to experience the sun rising, but once we realize that we had just observed that the sun rose, the sunrise instantly becomes a past event, so we are once again left with the question, 'will the sun rise tomorrow?' "

Neva threw her arms up. "I don't know how to answer that now!"

"I don't think any of us do," said Daisy.

" *Can* you even answer that question?" asked Culex. "You have nothing to support your claim that the sun will rise tomorrow. Is there any rationally compelling reason to trust induction for induction's sake and say that the sun will rise tomorrow because it always has?"

Daisy shrugged. "Is there?"

"Please tell me, if there is," Culex said. "Because I don't even know myself!"

Every one of the elemental wielders before Culex crashed to the ground on their faces after hearing the Dark Knight's statement. To have come to such a conclusion had incited stupefaction within every last one of them, to say the very least.

Neva shot back up first, screaming, "THEN WHAT WAS THE POINT OF ALL THIS?!"

"To draw attention to the truth that we know next to nothing about our own universe!" replied Culex as the rest returned to their feet. "And we may never know anything more than the meager amount of truths that we know now! There are worlds and realms that we are clueless of and therefore can't even begin to try and imagine their makeup. Our world could change in the blink of an eye, no apparent reason able to be identified if such a reason were to even exist. But that is the beauty of it all. It is within our nature to form inductive reasoning to try and figure out what we can and make sense of everything so that otherwise, we're not absolutely awestruck or terrified every time we see a tire spin or a bird fly. There's nothing we can do about that. Some use induction more than others, but we all use it to some extent at the very least. I am sure to make use of it whenever I can, but I am careful to keep an open mind about things because everything is such an open book."

Culex held out both of his arms in front of Daisy as his hands took on a golden glow, though he addressed everyone when he spoke. "Keep an open mind. Be wary of the future, distant and near; for we have yet to experience it. You never know what could happen at any

point in time."

The unique powers of Culex flowed from his hands to wash over Daisy's mutated, contorted form. It was not a fast process, but her body began to return to normal. All of the beastly qualities that she had inherited from her initial Betedaimon transformation receded and went away. Her limbs lost their awkward spindliness, and all her extra bulk shrank back to its previous, more feminine size. By the end of the procedure, a bright, silver glow overtook Daisy's form and momentarily turned her into a flashing silhouette.

"There, it has been done," Culex said. "The Betedaimon venom has been neutralized and will gradually pass out of your system within the next few weeks."

Daisy stared at her hands as the illumination subsided, a surreal feeling overtaking her. She stood with her body exactly the way it was before the introduction of the Betedaimon venom, though the abilities and powers she had worked on in her Betedaimon body did indeed carryover as Geno said they would. She raised a fist in front of and above her head to charge a portion of seismic energy, smiling once she felt how reactive and smooth her power flow had become.

"A word of advice, Kruna of Earth," stated Culex. "I have changed you back to your normal self, but I will not equip you. You would be wise to hesitate in your endeavors until you are properly suited for combat. Without any weapon or armor, you have no chance, especially not against the demon witch. The one in blue and gold over there is the only being of your group to even be remotely armored."

"Why should I hesitate?" Daisy replied. "My fists are my weapons, my joint weights are my armor. I'm set."

"Very well," replied Culex. "To each their own. Though, I still recommend for you all to upgrade at the earliest opportunity. A few armor attachments would add to the limited protective properties of your elemental clothing. But I digress. Just be sure that when the time has come, you defeat the demon witch. The coming battle will likely decide the fate of the entire planet; possibly, the entire universe. You must *not* lose, lest you doom all of this planet's

inhabitants."

Daisy nodded. "We all understand, Culex. Thank you for all of your help. Now that I've changed back, we're gonna go prepare for said battle to ensure that we won't lose!"

"Then I leave you all with this one saying," Culex murmured. "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift. That is why it is called, 'present.' Never take your present for granted, Kruna. Throughout history, the mantle of Kruna has heralded legendary heroes, but time has not been kind to everyone... I wish you all luck on your journey. Should you choose to comeback here for whatever reason, your trek will not be marred by perilous trials. Until then, Godspeed, and farewell, Kruna." With that, Culex glowed and faded away.

"Hey, Neva," said Daisy. "How would you like to be our honorary Kruna of Ice?"

"What? Me?" Neva asked in confusion.

"You heard what Culex said," Daisy replied. "We *all* looked like Kruna to him. That means you, too."

Neva didn't know what to say at first, but Andrew did. "Your eyes are starting to water, Neva."

"I oughta crown you!" Neva replied, sniffing and tearing up.

"I'll take that as a 'yes' then," Daisy said with a smile.

A broad grin appeared on Marut's face. "Hey, you know what we should do now that Daisy's back to normal?" he asked. "We should strike poses with a stormy lightning backdrop! It'll be EPIC! It'll be all dark and edgy and cool looking!"

"What-" Bowser stuttered. "We don't have fans! We're not trying to give away promotional artwork!"

"I just thought it would be good to get us in the mood for the battle!" exclaimed Marut.

"Actually..." Andrew said, arms crossed.

Bowser whipped around to the Kruna of Shadow. "No! Don't you start! Don't encourage him!"

"Hey, you gotta admit; that lightning backdrop idea sounds pretty cool!" said Andrew with a smile. "C'mon, Bowser!"

"Yeah!" Marut urged. "Daisy and Athelstan can stand all tall and mighty; and you, Bowser, can like be at an offset stance flaring your Blazer Claws, and I can be looking like I'm jumping out of the sky like this!" He took out his Cyclone Ninjato and tried to mimic what he was describing.

"That makes you look like a monkey," Daisy said to Marut.

"Alright, that's enough; no more of this," Bowser nonchalantly said, walking towards the entrance. "C'mon, let's just go already."

"Ooh, what about having our own toy line?" Marut wondered aloud. "Or we could make a video game!"

"Why?" asked Andrew. "So you can play with yourself?"

"Yes – I mean, no," said Marut. "I just remember seeing those Mini-Mario toys and they looked *awesome.* C'mon, man – having your own toy? That's the dream."

Warra dropped his head as he looked at Marut. "An hour ago, you said that running a milk bar was the dream."

"That's the dream too," said Marut. He then put up two fingers. "Er, two. That's the second dream. Why can't I have two, 'The Dreams?' I mean, c'mon. No last call – drink all the milk you want! How would that not be awesome?"

"You're nineteen, Marut," said Ramona. "You're technically still underaged."

"I'm eighteen and I've been to the Milk Tavern in Castle Town plenty of times," said Neva. "Authorities didn't give me no problems. I'll have to show you all where it is the next chance we get."

"How did we get on such a tangent?" Bowser asked Daisy. She responded with a shrug.

Athelstan started chuckling. "Oh yeah; a nice cold beverage sounds good right about now."

"I take it you know how to hold your milk, rock-slider?" asked Neva.

"I've got nine years on you – of course I know!" Athelstan replied. "I'm surprised that you do!"

"This is me, leaving now," Bowser said, waving his hand as he marched out the chamber entrance.

The moment Bowser emerged from Culex's Chamber, he was greeted with a sight he did not want to see. Marissa Arkana was floating by the bridge, staring him down. She did not look like she had recently arrived.

"You," Bowser said under his breath, protracting his Blazer Claws. The other Kruna soon emerged from the mountain, immediately drawing their tools and raising their energies upon catching sight of the smiling demon witch.

Chapter XXXIII

Redemption Denied :

The Kruna all readied themselves, anticipating a brutal conflict with the demon witch. Marissa's Malocchio Eye was active, though she didn't appear pressed to start a raucous. As she set her feet on the ground, her eyes – all three of them – narrowed in on Daisy.

"Oh look, it's the malcontent," said Marissa. "I see you've returned to your old self."

"No thanks to you," Daisy spat out. "Rotten witch."

Ramona gasped and covered her mouth, wide-eyed. "Daisy!"

"What?" Daisy asked. "I said 'witch,' Ramona!"

"She would've deserved it though," Neva grumbled.

"Hey! Don't be like that!" cooed Marissa. "I'm just like you! I put my shoes on one foot at a time!"

"I would hope so!" replied Athelstan. "Who puts their shoes on *two* feet at a time?"

Marissa stared at the Kruna of Stone for a while, blank in the face, deciding to ignore the question. "I'm not here to stir any trouble. I'm just here to talk to the Kruna of Earth, and *only* the Kruna of Earth." She held out her hands. "Look. My palms are clean, my broom is sheathed, my teeth are not flared, my crap has not been flung. Drop your guard, as I have dropped mine."

"Daisy?" Warra asked, awaiting direction.

Marissa had the most innocent smile any of the Kruna that had met her already had ever seen. Daisy wondered if the demon witch was up to something, but it was only for a brief, fleeting moment.

"You heard her," said Daisy. "Leave. All of you. That's an order!"

"Now hold on a minute," Neva snapped.

"No, just do as I say," Daisy demanded. "I'm actually a bit interested."

"You're really gonna trust her?" Andrew asked. "She screwed me over in Chai City!"

Daisy didn't break her stare at Marissa when she replied, "Yeah, I know."

"Okay, now I know you're not thinking," Bowser began.

Before the Koopa King said anything else, Daisy cut him off. "Yes, I'm not thinking. Too bad. Just do as I say, or I'll *make* you all leave."

Daisy was intensely stern, so much so that the Kruna all got the same kind of unconscious message that she meant serious business. Without any further rebuttle, Ramona and Andrew bridged a portal and let their teammates step through it first.

"We'll leave the portal open for you," Ramona said to Daisy. "We won't disband it until you pass through." The Kruna of Earth nodded in response as Ramona and Andrew walked through the portal. Now it was only Daisy and Marissa standing at the gateway to Culex's Chamber.

"So what are you here for?" Daisy asked, tone sharp. "I'm actually glad it's just you and me here. I don't have to worry about you trying anything funny on my friends."

Marissa stifled a laugh. "And even if I did, what would you do about it? If I was up to something right now, if I had an ambush or a trap ready and waiting for them as we spoke, what're you gonna do about it?"

"I'll grab you by the neck and stomp you down hundreds of yards beneath the surface," Daisy snarled. "I don't care how powerful you are, just as I don't care that you're immortal. Utter the wrong word, make the wrong move, and I swear, no Mushroom in existence will be able to fix what I'm gonna do to you."

"Woah, calm down there, Snappy," Marissa replied. "You're not a beast anymore. No need to get so defensive over your buds. So much vitriol. Sheesh; I mean, what did I do to you?"

"You're the reason why I'm here at Watcher's Cape in the first place, for starters."

"Oh, there's a list?"

Daisy's expression grew dark. "What you do to my friends, Sarasaland, and the world, you did to me. You take it up with me before anyone else. You're damn right there's a list."

"Please. There's not a damn thing you can do to stop me!"

"You're only saying that because you believe immortality makes you unbeatable," Daisy remarked, increasing in tempo. "Geno told us everything. He told us all about how far you had fallen. It's a shame. You know, it's really sad how much you went through at the expense of all those around you just for one singular, selfish goal. You're a long, long way from redemption, but maybe if you change now, you can get yourself started on the path leading there."

Marissa frowned, mixing scowling and laughing. "I'm not out for redemption. And so what if I'm immortal? That doesn't mean I want to be; not anymore, at least. You could say I'm taking my rage out on humanity. In a way, I envy the mortality of you humans. In fact, I flat out hate you and everyone else in this forsaken world. But on the other hand, I'm the one that has to live forever, so I should be the one with dominion over the entire planet! Eternal life means eternal rule."

"It has never meant such a thing!"

Marissa held her hand across her chest as she counted on her fingers to match her words. "There's only three outcomes of eternal life. One, you can turn out insane and manic – like me – two, you can become bitter and angry at the world – like me – or three, you can become perpetually melancholy and depressed."

"Like you?" Daisy added.

"What? No!" exclaimed the demon witch. "Why should I be depressed? Giving in to neurotic rage is way too much fun! You should try it sometime! In any case, all three outcomes – especially when combined together – turn into tyranny. Just look at your father. He's well on his way. And maybe..." Her Malocchio Eye flashed a shine as her voice trailed off.

Daisy's expression intensified even more. "Maybe what?"

Marissa tilted her head down, allowing her hat to conceal her eyes in shadows. "If you got out of your 'righteousness' for just a brief moment, then maybe you'd be able to witness some unknown clarity you would not have been able to conceive otherwise. The quest for immortality is a wicked and evil pursuit in and of itself. I was well aware of this. I chose it. Whether or not your father actually did remains to be seen. Am I regretting I chose it? No. Am I regretting I obtained it? Yes. For you see, the actions of chasing immortality are what lead to a legacy that guaranteed my place in history; a legacy of evil. Maybe back then, I wanted to live forever, but now after having obtained immortality, I realize I just wanted to be remembered. And now I have to live with a life-changing mistake forever..."

Marissa pulled out her broom and struck its shaft into the ground, not in a hostile move but in a display of emotion. "I was just like you, Kruna Daisy. I had my team, I fought my battles, I felled grand enemies. Life was great for me. But then, I decided that it wasn't great enough, and from that point onward, I let myself slip into corruption. Forevermore, I am a *remorseful raging spirit* ."

Daisy noticed Marissa's change in demeanor. It seemed that the Kruna of Earth always saw the demon witch filled with crazed wickedness. Now, Marissa looked calm, saddened even. The witch's eyes held definite anger, but it did not seem to be of the same kind of malice that Daisy had seen in every prior encounter with her.

"What do all the saints and 'pure' beings and all the Kruna throughout history have in common?" Marissa asked. "They've either succumbed to corruption, died trying to combat said corruption that had already been established, or they've ran and hid for the duration of their meager, pathetic lives, knowing that there's

just too much wrong in the world and that their influence is very little, let alone lasting. Good is weak. Evil is powerful. Good is finite and perishable. Evil lives on and multiplies like a plague, only to do combat with and destroy other evils that get in the way. Good is easily forgotten. Evil lasts forever."

Daisy looked like she was about to say something in response, but she held herself back and kept from breaking up the demon witch's words. No doubt Marissa had made the Kruna of Earth livid, yet she also felt bad for the witch.

"Do you see now how futile your attempts are," Marissa murmured. "Or do I have to show you something for you to realize the fault in destiny's stars? The odds are against you. They always have been. They always will be."

"That's more than fine," replied Daisy. "That's ideal. I always do my best when I'm the underdog anyways. And it sounds to me like you were a really great person in the past who just gave up on everyone and everything. If you're willing to turn things around and redeem yourself, then I'd strongly consider lending you a hand."

Immediately after she said that, Daisy felt a stark change in the atmosphere around them. Marissa's eyes were still concealed by the shadow of her hat, but her cryptic smirk became all too visible. Even so, the usual vile insanity was muted in the witch's smile.

"Kruna of Earth..." Marissa breathed. "I can see you mean well, but as I already said, redemption denied..." Her Malocchio Eye began to glow, brilliant light overtaking the world around them. "Right now, I'm more interested in you. Aren't you interested in you? You are an excellent elemental wielder, after all. I'm tired of looking through the past. *Come* ... Put your altruism aside so we can look ahead... You could have... *many destinies* ..."

Daisy was not prepared for what happened next. Suddenly, she and Marissa were floating over Castle Town. If the sickly gray and orange sky of dark smog overshadowing the city wasn't unsettling enough, the Kruna saw herself atop a newly built tower projecting out from the Central Castle and overlooking the citizens. She was in her usual earth wielder getup, but she wasn't wearing a crown. She

had on a silver commander's cap and an orange cape. In her hands, she held a field marshal's baton.

"What is this..." Daisy murmured.

"This is what could be," said Marissa. "This is five years into the future, where you kill your father."

"Wait..." Daisy barely whispered. "I kill him?"

Down below, several divisions of guards, soldiers, and assorted sentries assembled throughout the streets of Castle Town. All appeared to be gathering around the Central Castle's tower to await command from the alternate Daisy. The actual Kruna of Earth locked her eyes on her alternate counterpart, all but certain that the grimly smiling person in her line of sight had become twisted beyond her own comprehension.

"But why me?" Daisy wondered aloud. " *I'm* the one who kills him? I don't understand, I mean, I never had any intention to kill anyone..."

"Well, that's not what this world is telling us, now is it?" replied Marissa.

Daisy saw that her alternate self's right arm was covered from below her shoulder down by a gauntlet and a long sleeve. That same arm also looked unnatural and robotic in its movements. The alternate Daisy proceeded to strike a series of poses and arm motions with her baton, signaling for direct and precise movements of the assembled sections of the military below her.

"Look's to me like this is a definite autarchy here," said Marissa.

"But how?" Daisy said, her whispers cracking. "If my dad's gone, how do I still end up...the way he wanted me to be? No...I'm much worse, aren't I? How does this happen? How's this even possible?"

"I don't know," Marissa answered with an equal lack of volume. "You tell me, Sarasa girl."

Sirens began to sound off as searchlights flashed through the sky. Something significant was about to take place, and judging by the

wide-eyed, tormented look of the creepily smiling alternate Daisy, the actual Daisy expected bloodshed and violence in abundance to transpire. But Marissa decided that the Kruna of Earth had seen enough, and put an end to the vision. Within seconds, they found themselves back at the entrance to Culex's Chamber.

"There are more universes that I can peer into; many more destinies in wait..." said Marissa, her tone more serious than Daisy ever remembered from her. "Unfortunately, in one way or another, they're all damaged, broken, disorderly – borderline quarantined – and they all need something new, something different. That's where I – where *we* – come in, that is, if you ally with me and serve as my new viceroy. Otherwise, for the sake of preventing another potential broken world, I need to destroy both King Sarasa, and you."

"Please, like you'd do any better!" Daisy snapped.

Marissa shrugged. "I wouldn't. But that's the thing. This world has long since lost. This world has long since waded in the waters of the wicked. No matter what happens, no matter what anyone does, this world of ours will remain blighted beyond repair and will only become worse. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, and we're all damned."

"Sorry, but I don't subscribe to that kind of outlook!" Daisy proclaimed. With a spirited smile, she tapped into her elemental energy and transformed into her Nova state. Her hair spiked and shot forward and backwards like a large and a small hand fan both joined together, her eyes turned gold and gained the black talon markings underneath her sockets, and her skin darkened to a shiny bronze, all coinciding with a spike in power production. Once fully in Nova Form, she stared down Marissa, her smile transitioning into an intense, smug grin.

The Kruna of Earth noticed how different her Nova Transformation felt compared to the previous few times she had used it. It was a form she hadn't been in since her battle against Elkon, but she remembered a strange sense of strain and increased energy drain that lasted for the duration of her transformation and for some while afterwards. Having just transformed, she did not feel nearly the same wasting of power that she did in the past. *Geno's training*

worked, she thought. She lifted a hand up and rested her eyes upon it as she clenched her grip into an ultra-tight fist. *I've saved so much energy that would've been wasted through transforming that I feel like I could muster three transformations into the Nova Form in the same day! The gap between my power and Marissa's has closed significantly! I can't wait to see what this'll be like once I finish the training Geno has left for me to do so that I can fully master this Nova Form of mine!*

"Nova Form warrior," the demon witch murmured. "Isn't that interesting. I didn't even remotely provoke you, and yet here you are, flashing and flaunting your power; power that still couldn't stand against me..."

Daisy's smile faded in an instant. "The hell's any of that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Marissa harshly shot back. "You think I'm supposed to be intimidated by you? You couldn't match me before, and you still can't match me now."

Daisy widened her stance, refocusing her energy. "Well then let's see!"

She clenched her teeth as her muscles flooded with raw power. Her outflow of seismic energy became visible, the silvery shock waves rumbling in the air around her. The amount of power radiating within her and outwards took her by surprise, but she didn't show it. She kept her focus on generating more.

Marissa shook her head. "Just as I thought. I was expecting a response like that."

Cracking sounds became audible, as if Daisy's energy was actually managing to snap and crush the air. The Kruna's stare housed both fierce focus and ferocious intensity. With each passing moment, she became more and more aware of how much of an improvement her reserves had made. The ground underneath her feet started to crack, her power leaking and rippling into the rocky terrain. Each crackle and snap in the air around her came with a quick but potent flash, making it seem as if lightning had begun flaring around her.

The disturbance created from Daisy's rising power further distorted the air around both her and Marissa. The breeze didn't make the demon witch turn away though; no. Lord Arkana kept her gaze locked on the earth wielder before her. To have so much seismic energy radiating not just in the ground but through the air was nothing short of impressive, further increasing as time passed. In spite of all the strain, Daisy pressed on, determined to see how deep she could pull.

That's it , Marissa thought. *Go ahead and power-up all you want...*

I bet I'm coming close to having enough power to start an earthquake right about now! Daisy exclaimed in her mind. The thought urged her on to increase her power output even further, though her display did not seem to worry Marissa at all.

The ground underneath Daisy cracked some more as her vocal cords sounded like they got caught in a lawnmower. The light show around her intensified in brightness and scope to the point where Marissa began wondering if the air around herself had went beyond blowing and had now started tremoring. Daisy spent several more moments forcing more power to the surface of her body before she got content and cut it short. Some part of her decided not to try to activate all of her available energy. She established a point of maintenance within her and relaxed her focus, satisfied with her production.

Marissa's expression remained unchanged. "Why'd you stop?"

"What?" Daisy grunted out.

"Keep going," Marissa said, nonchalant. "Power-up all you want – force it and surpass me if you think you can, for all I care."

Daisy smirked. "I bet I can! But I won't. Not now."

"Why not? If that's the case, why even show what you've presented already? I hadn't so much as made a single attack or hostile advance, yet you're here trying to assert yourself to dominance. Just like your father; just like an animal."

"I'm not an animal, and I am nothing like my dad! What are you trying to say?"

"I shouldn't be surprised, though," Marissa said, ignoring her question. "Nova Form has a notorious reputation among the higher-ups for invoking...unsavory behavior in otherwise noble characters. They considered prohibiting such an ability and have sought to deem it immoral as a result of the immoral things that many elemental wielders, Kruna or not, allowed themselves to commit when they let pride and overconfidence in their power get to their head and when they let primal instincts shine through their eroding sense of restraint."

"Strong fighters, but with no character," Daisy replied. "That's what they were!"

"As a former user of the Nova Form, let me give you some words of advice," said Marissa. "You're under altered judgment if you ever ride with your enhanced power instead of exhibit active control. Maybe it's your abuse of the Nova Form that turns you into the militaristic dictator we saw moments ago?"

An angered scowl arose within Daisy. She would have thought that Marissa was just trying to play with her mind had the demon witch not been so serious in her tone. Some part of her began questioning Marissa's enigmatic motives. The level of ambiguity shown by the demon witch could not be even remotely understated.

"There are many things that I have seen in the years that I have been alive," Marissa said. "As I have mentioned earlier, here's one thing that's certain, that has rang true throughout history; you either die a noble hero, or you live long enough to watch yourself become a villain...or you live as a failed hero, forever shunned by the masses. Which one will you be? Or, which one will you *let yourself* become?"

Marissa reached around for her broom and pulled it free from the ground. "That's the truth of our reality." She propped herself onto her broom, then began levitating into the air. Still just as serious, and even a bit somber, Marissa said as a parting statement, "A tough girl like you should be able to face the truth."

Daisy watched as the demon witch rose and sped off into the distance. Grimacing in agitation, she tried to coax herself to calm down, but the witch's words were tough concepts to have to grapple with. *Does anything she said matter if – I mean, when – we beat her?* shewondered. Incensed, she charged some seismic energy into her right arm and slashed her hand through the air. *This is too much to have to think about!*

It took a few moments for Daisy to ease herself to a point where she could regain some calm. Once she felt relaxed enough, she reverted out of her Nova Form to return to normal and made a move for the portal Ramona and Andrew had left open for her. *I've got Marissa, my dad, and Kokoro to deal with,* she thought. *But am I myself another enemy that I have to account for?*

Chapter XXXIV

Countdown to the Blood Moon :

With the other Kruna off doing recon and gathering items in Sarasa Field and at Castle Town, Daisy stayed at Geno's Sanctuary to get a head start on the preparations for the looming Blood Moon. She stood across from him in the same general area that they had been using, awaiting direction. It had been an hour since their return from Watcher's Cape, and there was no telling what Geno would have in store for her next after the chakra work and the Silent Realm trial.

"What I have to teach you will prove to be vital in countering many of Marissa's Malocchio abilities," said Geno. "So, you can credit me in teaching you a defensive technique should you successfully learn this."

"Can I learn a counter-attack while we're at it too?!" Daisy asked.

"No," was Geno's flat response. He went on after Daisy's momentary slump in posture, telling her, "You're going to need to be able to account for Marissa's Malocchio Eye if you hope to have even a chance of success against her. I can not use up precious time trying to teach this to the others. You're the Nova Form user of the group, so I expect you to be the one to go straight for the demon witch when the time comes to confront her."

Daisy nodded with a smirk. "Okay, so what are we getting into?"

"We're going to need to cultivate and open your third eye."

"WHAT?!" Daisy yelled. Almost immediately, she thought back to Marissa's third eye and began picturing herself with one like the witch's. "I don't want an eye growing out of my forehead! I've seen Marissa's when it opens! Out of the question! No way!"

"No, Daisy!" Geno yelped. "Not literally a 'third eye!' You're not Marissa!"

"Oh," Daisy said, sobering up in an instant. "Well what do you mean then?"

"There's actual third eyes, like Marissa has, and there's spiritual third eyes. We are going to work on this spiritual variant. Rather than having an actual, physical third eye, you will develop the spiritual equivalent that – although won't grant you any special abilities apart from a minor power increase – will function to protect you from the powers of her eye that you have yet to see."

Daisy moved into a readied stance. "Alrighty, so let's get to it already!"

"This is an oft overlooked energy center," stated Geno. "But the process to open it is simple and should not be a challenge since your chakras have just recently been cleansed. We should accomplish this task within the hour. All that this requires is for you to concentrate the flow of all of your chakras into the region of your forehead chakra. You will need to make sure you're in a meditative state before you do this. Take note of the amount of pressure that you will feel in the center of your forehead, and whatever you do, don't stop adding pressure until you've reached a point where the pressure breaks and becomes a free flow for your chakras through that one point in your forehead. Is that clear?"

"Clear as glass," Daisy replied. She got herself ready to meditate and begin all that the cosmic being had described to her.

"Oh, and one more thing," said Geno. "We're going to begin working on your mastery of the Nova Form as well, so while we're developing your third eye, we'll need you to be in your Nova Form."

Daisy cracked a smile and made a quick transition from her base form to her Nova Form. It seemed like it took less time and effort to do so with each successive transformation sequence she underwent. Just as she noticed earlier with Marissa, the amount of energy wasted through the transformation itself had been cut down to a small chunk of what was lost in the past. Even so, it still wasn't an easy feat for her to make the transformation and it still induced a veritable amount of strain. Geno managed to discern that much upon watching her switch, but it fared far better than it would have

had Daisy went straight to Culex the moment she was mutated by Marissa's venom.

"Excellent," Geno said. "Now you'll stay in Nova Form through the Blood Moon. No breaks."

The Kruna of Earth's smile shot straight down into a frown. Mouth agape, she screamed, "What do ya mean I gotta stay in Nova Form through the Blood Moon?! That's brutal, man! Are you insane?!"

Geno chuckled. "I think you'll find that the time you've spent in your Betedaimon form will make it much less difficult than it would've been otherwise. Remember how I said the two forms were one in the same? Well, just as you got to a point where the Betedaimon form felt natural, you now have to get to a point where the Nova Form feels natural. Mastery of the Nova Form comes when the amount of energy spent transforming is negligible, making the transition into and out of the form innate and instinctive. The Nova Form should feel as though you could stay in it all the time and not have to endure the systemic stress and strain that sustaining it would normally cause. Being in Nova Form should be like breathing – it should be effortless and not require any thought."

"So I need to stay in Nova Form for the next two weeks at the very least," Daisy murmured. "And not only that, but I need to be in it while I'm trying to get this third eye thing going. And you're saying that any training done between now and the Blood Moon, I have to do in Nova Form?"

"I'm saying that *every single thing you do* must be while in Nova Form, even when you're doing absolutely nothing. No matter what,you will *not* power down and switch back to normal; not even when you're eating, not even when you're resting, not even when you're sleeping."

Daisy sighed, but didn't sound discouraged when she spoke. "That's a lot to ask for."

"I know," Geno replied. "Of the few that have achieved the Nova Form in the past, none have ever mastered it. That's why I'm asking this of *you* ."

In this manner, Geno trained and readied the eight Kruna. Two weeks passed in which Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Neva, Ramona, Andrew, and Daisy all made increases to their powers and skills with Geno's help. Although not stellar by any means, the Kruna collectively upped their elemental wielding to new levels and made noticeable improvements across the board. Their training as a whole was a lot more active and conventional as opposed to that which he had administered solely to Daisy during the time she spent in her Betedaimon body.

The Kruna also developed new techniques; each wielder learning or creating at least one new move. Ramona made her first Photovado, a thick column of light that bends inwards on itself to become a spiked conglomeration of scattered light waves. Athelstan involved some ingenuity and creativity in creating his Povado, a launched boulder that splits in midair into smaller chunks like an extreme form of a scattershot blast. Bowser and Marut's tag-team move, the Torch Twister, proved to be just what its name described – a big, flaming tornado.

Throughout their two weeks of training, Daisy stayed in Nova Form the entire time and had succeeded in unlocking her third eye. Geno said that she would only be able to activate it whenever Marissa targeted her with one of her Malocchio's abilities. She didn't seem to sweat about knowing the when and what, saying that she would know in the moment and understand better then rather than beforehand. Based on what Geno had said before, Warra understood her newly acquired ability to be a defense against psychic, magic, and mental attacks.

With a special ritual spell Geno cast on a sizable, ornamental mirror the Kruna had fetched on a side quest in the Birabuto Desert, the Kruna were each able to partake in a mini-game-like challenge that the cosmic being dubbed, "The Arena." The spell involved unlocking the Warrior's Realm in the Spirit World by way of the Kruna's combination of their eight elements paired with Geno's prowess in magic. Their efforts permanently etched the mirror into the ground next to the sandpit behind Geno's house and turned the mirror's glass into a portal that led into the aforementioned dimension.

The Kruna took turns stepping into the portal, as only one of them could try The Arena at a time. Upon entering the Warrior's Realm, the challenger would be transported to a regal deck on the middle level of an ethereal, enchanting castle where another, larger mirror portal awaited. When the challenger passed through the portal, the game would begin. He or she would then have to battle the toughest enemies they had faced in their travels as Kruna. Geno had said that at the time, that meant they would face all the guardians they had fought at the elemental shrines, the boss rush at Elkon's Tower, Dry Bowser, Grekka – Master Pendant included – and Elkon – including all phases of the Revenant form that the Master Pendant contorted his deceased body into. They would all be fought in randomized order, though Geno assured that Grekka and Elkon would always be the second to last and last respectively. Anyone the Kruna had faced after Elkon was not a part of this particular Arena Challenge.

The challenger faced each opponent in an environment identical to where the battle had actually occurred. The Warrior's Realm drew from past events, recent history, and established locations to recreate the battlefields and opponents of each conflict. Some of the fights that required special circumstances for victory, such as when the seven Kruna who fought against the Revenant released an Elemental Wave to emerge triumphant, were altered to allow for an individual Kruna to come away with a win. The enemies were also only as powerful as they were at the time they were originally faced, meaning that Kokoro, for example, was only as powerful as he was at the Ice Shrine in The Arena. In between fights, a mirror would appear to transport the challenger away from the previous battlefield and to the rest area, a special section of the wondrous castle similar to the initial entry point where they would get a chance to recover and see their stats up to that point on an overhead monitor. The monitor was mounted to a projecting wall above the mirror that led to the next battlefield, and it displayed things such as the total time the challenger had taken, cumulative fighting stats, a portrait of the next enemy, and the remaining battles to go. Flame Behemoth, Necromancer and Necropaladin, The Crestfallen, Vodyanoy, Gargoyle Nukpana, Kokoro, Deyanira the Dream Destroyer, the assemblage of throwback bosses at Elkon's Tower, Dry Bowser, Grekka, and Elkon altogether made for 11 separate battles to have

to account for.

In order to beat The Arena, the challenger had to go and defeat every enemy in one continuous run. Whenever a challenger lost a fight, he or she would be kicked out of the Warrior's Realm and sent back to Geno's Sanctuary. If they went back into the Warrior's Realm, they would have to start The Arena all over again, likely in a different order that could either be advantageous or detrimental based on the individual. Due to the egregious difficulty each opponent had demonstrated in the past, eight – but only eight – Max Mushrooms rested on their own individual pedestals in the rest area, only replaced after the conclusion of each successful or failed run. The Arena had proved to be brutal; physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally demanding – especially considering the Kruna each had to face copies of both Grekka and Elkon again. Even so, it succeeded as an effective training tool that brought the Kruna to their limits and beyond. It took some time and *a lot* of do-overs before each of the Kruna beat The Arena, but they emerged hardened and better than ever before as a result.

In ways, the Kruna had evolved into a more cohesive group. Yet in other ways, they had grown disturbed and unnerved. Neva had become more tame, although she still retained some spitefulness that refused to go away. Bowser and Athelstan both were embracing their roles as Kruna and found the experience of being heroic figures more invigorating and revitalizing with each passing day, while Marut seemed to become increasingly fearful and anxious over the possibility of a sudden death among the group as time went on. Despite everyone on the team saying otherwise, the Kruna of Air wondered if he was going to turn out to be a liability down the road and began questioning himself on a regular basis. Andrew seemed to be straying away from the group, often wandering off on his own and letting his feelings and thoughts haunt him, only for either Ramona or Bowser to follow and make sure he didn't get ambushed by Marissa or Kokoro.

Interestingly enough, Daisy seemed to be showing the same amount of rage and indignation that had developed in her time with her mutated body. Geno had no clue as to why her anger had persisted. Daisy and Warra got into arguments with each other often, one such

instance ending in Daisy punching him and bruising his collarbone. When confronted about the incident, the team as a whole accused her of losing judgment under the strain of constantly being in her Nova Form and urged her to transform out of it. She refused to power down though, citing Geno's request for her to remain in Nova Form. She didn't apologize to anyone.

In spite of the conflict, Warra made sure he was around whenever Daisy needed to be calmed down. He figured that yes, her anger could be from the strain of having to indefinitely remain in Nova Form, and it could still be some residual effect from Marissa's Betedaimon venom that would take time to wear off, but he also wondered if there was something else going through Daisy's mind as well. When he had asked about her mother's bracelets, she had told him to keep possession of them and to make sure they were somewhere safe on his person. He agreed to keep holding onto them even though she had almost needlessly handed him a debilitating injury.

On one of Neva's trips into Castle Town, she caught word of some sort of citywide special event scheduled to start within a handful of hours before the rising Blood Moon that would last all throughout the night and into the early morning. She didn't look any further into what it would be since she was in a rush at the time. All of the Kruna assumed that Marissa would draw power from the Blood Moon from the comforts of her mansion lair. This would be the ideal scenario, because then none of the Castle Town citizens, residents of neighboring kingdoms, or tourists would get caught up in the crossfire that would ensue. The only problem with that would be that they would be taking the fight into the demon witch's territory. That would put the Kruna at a considerable disadvantage that would only compound with the disadvantage they already had in having to face down Marissa, her five Sweeps, King Boo, and whatever hellhounds would be lying in wait. Marissa was more likely than not anticipating such an assault from the Kruna. Her Malocchio Eye could alert her the moment they got close, and her mansion and territory as a whole could be rigged with tricks and traps beforehand, even if only to delay until her Blood Moon ritual was finished. However things would turn out, the showdown was not going to be anything less than gritty and ugly.

But the focus on the looming battle had to be diverted, even though it was just roughly thirty-six hours away. It was the day before the night of the Blood Moon, and a strange disturbance in the atmosphere had risen. No one had heard from Rosalina or anyone of the Comet Observatory in the time since the incident at Chai City. Up to this point, Marissa had been quiet in her affairs, and Kokoro was nowhere to be seen. The only real issues that the Kruna had came from battling the increasing bands of hellhounds that continued to appear throughout Sarasa Field. That streak of relative tranquility ended when Kokoro showed up from the tunnel entrance of Geno's Sanctuary to interrupt the Kruna's break in between training sessions.

Kokoro's appearance was abrupt and without warning. The assembled elemental wielders all showed varying degrees of anxiety and frustration upon seeing Kokoro trespass on what had been their domain, though the Soul Stealer did not seem to be even a trifle bit impressed by the bumps in power they had all made. Daisy in particular went livid the moment she caught sight of him. Geno appeared alongside the Kruna, having noticed both the large, malevolent energy signature that accompanied the Soul Stealer and the Master Pendant adorned around the fiend's neck.

"Come any closer to us and you'll end up a hundred feet underground," Nova Daisy hissed at Kokoro.

The Soul Stealer was impassive as he replied, "If that's you trying to hand me a threat, then you clearly don't deserve the information that I have for you. I would comment on your return from beasthood, but there are more pressing matters at hand."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Bowser. "What information?"

"Regarding Marissa, the witch," Kokoro replied. "I had a run-in with her not too long ago. She wanted some of my energy for some sort of powerful ritual spell, though I sure as hell did not give her any."

"She took a large share of mine a couple weeks ago," said Andrew. "She must be collecting as much as she can for something."

"Is it for tomorrow's Blood Moon?" Warra asked.

"If it is, then I wonder what she's doing at the tropical islands out to the east of here," Kokoro said. "There's been quite the disruption in the ether within the past hour or so."

"Easton Kingdom," Neva muttered. "Now why would she be out there of all places..."

"Wait; don't you guys all know what this means?" asked Warra. "While she's out of the lair, we have a chance to try and sneak in! Maybe we'll get a hold of some critical secrets or special equipment to use for tomorrow!"

"And we can trash the place while we're at it!" added Neva.

"That's if Kokoro is telling the truth, you guys," said Bowser. "He could be in cahoots with her."

"Now why would I do that?" Kokoro asked. "She tried to kill me."

"And you tried to kill me!" Daisy snapped. "So why should we heed whatever 'alert' you're giving us?"

"As much as I hate you, 'Kruna' of Earth, I feel it's necessary for you all to know," said Kokoro. "Marissa needs to be put down. Neither of us will like what she'll do to the planet should she get any more of an upper hand around here than she already has."

Daisy then saw something that pierced a chord within her psyche. For just a split second, she caught sight of an image of her father flash in the gem of the Master Pendant. Then, she just as quickly saw her own self in its reflection before it returned to its dull, pink and gold melding color.

Bowser grimaced. "Should we be worried that she's watching and listening to us through her Malocchio as we speak?"

"She's preoccupied with whatever incantation she's trying to complete to notice," Kokoro replied.

"That's it!" Warra exclaimed in joy. "Even if she can see everything

and anything, she can only focus her Malocchio Eye on one specific area at a time!"

"Explain, waterboy," said Neva.

"This is a critical gap in her Malocchio Eye!" Warra said. "What this means is, she'll have her normal, conventional line of sight through her default two eyes, and when she opens her third eye, she'll have Remote Viewing as well, but that Remote Viewing will only show her where she projects her focus – *not* multiple places at once!"

"At any one point, she can see anywhere, but not *everywhere at once* ," said Bowser. "And if she's devoting so much effort to her current spell, then she has no focus through her Remote Viewing, regardless of whether her Malocchio is active or not!"

"It's like tunnel vision to the extreme!" added Ramona.

"So let's do this," Bowser said. "Let's split up; have a larger team go to the Easton Kingdom Tropical Islands to preoccupy and hopefully disrupt whatever Marissa's up to over there, and we'll have a smaller team head north to infiltrate her lair and see if there's any materials, potions, or anything else that could help us against her!"

"And destroy everything that she could use!" Neva yelled, raring to go. "Maybe we can even find a way to eradicate Marissa's hellhound horde!"

"Awesome," Daisy said, vexed. "So while you guys are handling that, I'll be dragging Kokoro's body like a stiff."

The Kruna of Earth's remark drew everyone's attention away from Marissa and the witch's lair. The sanctuary became uncomfortably quiet for several moments, the pause broken by Kokoro's grinning reply. "I was hoping you would say something like that."

Warra got ready to raise his voice and say something in contention against Daisy and Kokoro both, but Bowser grabbed him by the arm. The Kruna of Fire shook his head at his water teammate. Warra sighed and kept quiet.

Kokoro laughed. "I hope you don't intend on having your friends bail

you out this time, Sarasa."

"My Nova Form against your Master Pendant," Daisy said. With a smile, she added, "The Easton Kingdom Tropical Islands would be a perfect place. There's several islands there. We won't have to worry about anyone getting in the way. Plus, I can be nearby in case Marissa tries something underhanded on my friends. That's my only request; you should know a lot about underhandedness."

"That's fine," said Kokoro. "You'll be too busy fighting for your life to be worried about how your comrades are faring against the demon witch anyways." He turned to head back for the mountain tunnel. "Follow me. I know of a quick way to get there."

Without looking back at her teammates, Daisy kept behind Kokoro as he led her out of Geno's Sanctuary and to Sarasa Field. Geno and the remaining Kruna watched as the earth wielder and archfiend left, the two's mutual hatred for each other set to intensify even more with their upcoming conflict.

"A quick way to get to the tropical islands?" Neva wondered aloud. "How? Easton Kingdom's several miles out to sea..."

"We should not have let her do that," Warra said. He turned to Geno and barked, "Why didn't you speak up and say anything against her?"

"She is nearing mastery over the Nova Form," Geno replied. "She will be fine. The only concern I would have is about the Master Pendant. Let's focus on Marissa. Now, if Kokoro is referring to what I think he is referring to, then their method of transport to the Easton Kingdom islands will be yours as well. When you are all ready and have decided what to do, I'll tell you where to go. This will most likely prove to be the penultimate tilt of your campaign in Sarasaland here."

Athelstan, Marut, Neva, Ramona, and Andrew all turned their attention to Bowser and Warra for the plan. If they all agreed to what was said earlier, then that would mean one group would be going to the Easton Kingdom Tropical Islands, and the other smaller group would be off to The Deep Wood and Marissa's Lair.

"Alright, guys," said Bowser. "So this is what we're going to do..."

Chapter XXXV

Easton Kingdom Tropical Islands :

"Is this it?" Ramona asked the group. "Geno said there were two of these that would both lead to different areas of the Easton Kingdom."

Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, and Andrew had gone a short distance north through the eastern portion of Sarasa Field to come to a wide green pipe that Bowser recognized as a "Warp Pipe." These were few and far between, not nearly as plentiful as in the Mushroom Kingdom.

"Right," Bowser replied. "He said that one would lead to the smaller, inner islands nearer to the coastline, and the other would lead to the larger, outer islands further out to the sea."

"So which one is this one then?" asked Marut. "Do we take this one? Where would Marissa be? Where would Daisy and Kokoro be? Did they take this one or the other one?"

"Geno said the other one's to the south of here," noted Athelstan. "So as far as we know, we could pop up in the Easton Kingdom Whitewood or the beaches of the tropical islands. Knowing them, they probably went for the beach. Smaller amount of land for fighting, but they won't have to worry as much about trees and obstructions."

"Wait, I'm confused," Ramona said. "So the whitewood is supposed to be the region making up the outer islands? Why wouldn't the whitewood be a part of the inner tropics? Why is it all the way out there rather than closer to here?"

"I don't know how geography works!" Bowser grunted. "I once saw a glacier right next to a volcano! I'm not asking any questions about geography!"

"Does anyone know how to use this?" Marut asked as he leaned

over and stuck his head into the pipe.

"Take the Warp Pipe, he said," Andrew mumbled. "It'll be easy, he said..."

Bowser facepalmed. "Marut, all you gotta do is stand on it and then ease down in feet first."

"No, wait, I think I got it," Marut said, squirming around. "I think you just gotta like, climb in and-"

The Kruna of Air suddenly flopped over and fell all the way through the Warp Pipe. The others looked inside, then looked at each other. Marut didn't come back up, and they did not see him in there.

Andrew arched his back and folded his arms. "I guess that means it works!"

"Of course it works," said Bowser. "It always works. Unless someone fiddled with it and made it a one way transport."

"You're experienced with Warp Pipes?" asked Ramona. "I've seen maybe one or two but got scared because I didn't know where they'd lead to."

"Yeah, I've messed with a few of these before," Bowser replied. "You all go in first. I'll take up the rear."

With the Power Vase by her feet, Marissa continued focusing magic through her ritual spell on one of many of the tropical islands just within the Easton Kingdom's Whitewood region. Her spell nearing completion, she shifted its focus onto Tamara so that the green and silver-clothed Black Mage would bridge the portal while she tapped into the power of her Malocchio Eye.

King Boo flew down in front of Marissa and Tamara with eight Green Mushrooms in hand. He handed them to Marissa for her to keep on her person, though he did not look happy about having to gather them.

"These aren't very easy to find, I hope you know," King Boo said. "And why eight? Why does everything always have to be *eight* with you?"

"Because, silly!" replied Marissa. "If you turn eight sideways, you've got endless possibilities!"

"Remind me what those Green Mushrooms are for again?" Tamara asked.

"It's for a backup spell that I will make in case this doesn't work," Marissa said. "I'll run up to one of those Kruna, unleash my magic with these Green Mushrooms, and presto – this Power Vase will finally be filled. Somebody's getting their energy drained. I don't care who. I would give my own, but it would require me donating all of mine and I need to make sure I have all of mine available for tomorrow. The amount of power I exhaust for today can be made up for so long as I don't go crazy." Tamara let his head drift up into the sky and away from the demon witch after hearing that last part.

"I think you're better off skipping this and going straight for one of those rookie Kruna," said King Boo. "You realize that trying this again is not going to work after the way she reacted the last time."

"I don't care!" Marissa exclaimed, opening her Malocchio with a smile. "I tried being nice, but that doesn't do crap for anyone! Now I'm just gonna force it out of her like I should've done the first time!"

"Is the cost of energy for this spell really going to be worth it?" King Boo asked.

"It better be," said Marissa. "Or I'm taking a chunk out of *your* power *along with* two or three of those Kruna's to ensure that tomorrow's crucial divine ritual spell will not fail. I've already sacrificed enough hellhounds for it, and that Kruna of Shadow didn't have a lot of energy left in him for me to take." Her smile turned grim. "Besides; at least out here, we don't have to worry about her wrecking the mansion if she gets ornery."

"Just a few moments now and the portal will be ready," said Tamara. He addressed King Boo as he added, "I'm assuming you're just

going to drag her out of there the moment it opens."

"Yup!" the royal spectre replied, readying shadow energies in his right arm.

Nova Daisy stared down Kokoro as she took soft, slow, lateral strides on the spacious sandy ground of the inner tropical islands of Easton Kingdom. Kokoro watched her, arms folded and stationary. Their postures both were upright and erect, their faces both housed varied smiles, and their powers were both at their highest out of the three times they had encountered each other. And yet, Daisy had a special sparkle and shine in her eyes as she made her steps around the battlefield.

"Rubber match," Daisy said. With a few more steps, she brought her movement to a stop. Kokoro turned to face her, and a heated face-off ensued.

The hatred filled the atmosphere, sizzling the very air the two beings breathed. Tension. Anger. Fury. Odium. Contempt. Daisy and Kokoro's very presence together at that moment threatened to suffocate all other lifeforms within a mile radius like a nuclear weapon built on nothing but abhorrence. Whatever wildlife was nearby sensed it and fled. Quick.

"Death match," Kokoro said in correction.

Daisy chuckled as her mouth drifted open to say, "Don't tempt me."

Kokoro chuckled in turn as he unfolded his arms and murmured, "So-called hero..."

"How about this time, don't whine when I beat you?" the Kruna of Earth said.

Kokoro crossed his wrists together and let his light energy flow. "...I won't..."

Daisy got herself ready to fight, though left her stance open for attack in a bold move. Kokoro saw this and narrowed his eyes, not

sure if he should be glad that she left herself open, or angered that she did not bother putting up any guard. The fiend decided to wait and see what the earth wielder was going to do.

Daisy didn't do anything. A growing disturbance around one of the islands in the distance had suddenly drawn her attention. Though not very conspicuous, a slight vortex had developed in the sky there. She didn't turn her head, but her eyes were not focused on Kokoro at all.

Naturally, the Soul Stealer took advantage of Daisy's momentary distraction and fired off a high-speed beam of light. The Kruna of Earth caught the attack in her periphery though, and brought her hands up and together to slam the energy down into the ground. When the billowing smoke and debris cleared, Daisy gave Kokoro a blank stare.

"Damn you," Kokoro muttered, gritting his teeth.

"I expected as much," Daisy said. "A guy like you will claw for any meager victory he can get."

The Kruna of Earth kicked up a chunk of ground and slammed her fist into it to send it hurtling at Kokoro. The archfiend batted it away, hunched over and not amused.

"You earth wielders are supposed to be adept at seeing in the dark," Kokoro said. "Will that make it extra painful when I shuttle lasers through your retinae?"

"I can't say," Daisy replied. "You're not gonna have a chance to do so." She dashed forward with great speed, catching Kokoro by surprise and ramming into him with a crushing Wario-esque elbow. The maneuver knocked all the air from the fiend's lungs and sent him staggering backwards several steps before he could regain control and cease his momentum.

Kokoro coughed up some blood and grunted in frustration. "What the hell, Sarasa? We did not start yet!"

"What do you mean we didn't start yet?" Daisy responded. "We

started when you decided you wanted to blast me when I wasn't looking!"

"I could do without your sass," Kokoro grumbled.

Daisy's eyes went wide. "SASS?! How is it sass when you blatantly tried to cheat?! Damn, it's like the Striker wild card round against Petey Piranha all over again!"

"I almost wish I knew what you were talking about," the Soul Stealer said, assuming his counter stance.

"I'm glad you don't," Daisy growled, getting into position to attack. "You would have given the league a very bad name."

Marut flew out of the Warp Pipe and landed face first on the lush, mystical forest floor of the Easton Kingdom Whitewood. He picked himself up and looked around in amazement and wonder of the bright and lively trees, the crisp, enchanting air, and the ethereal light shining down through the overhead leaves on the scattered idols. For as harrowing as their journeys had been, this dense forest was by far the most pleasant, serene, and even unearthly area the team had been to yet. He could also sense that some of the organisms and beings in this area collectively had some of the strongest energy signatures they've came across as well. One by one, Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, and Andrew emerged from the Warp Pipe as well, all awestruck by their surroundings.

"Neva did say that most of Easton Kingdom had been ruled as a wildlife reserve," Ramona murmured. "Is this what is able to grow and flourish without influence and interference from modern society?"

"This place just makes me want to soar high up into the air," said Marut, wide-eyed. "I always wanted to just take off and fly. I hate being bound by gravity. I just want to take up and go high into the sky at will. I...I want to fly across the rainbow, and close my eyes and just believe..."

"We need to get you a Pendant of Flight, bro," Bowser said with a smile. "First chance we get, and the first one we see, it's yours."

"I feel like Marissa and King Boo are nearby," Andrew sharply said. With a clenched jaw, he added, "They're really up to something. The atmosphere feels beyond disturbed."

As if on cue, an echo of thunder ran through the whitewood despite the overhead sunshine. All five of the elemental wielders directed their attention towards the west.

"What could she be up to all the way out here?" Athelstan asked.

"We'll just have to go and see, now won't we?" Andrew replied, already dashing in the direction of the mystic disturbance.

Bowser grunted and sighed, sticking two fingers on his forehead. "I swear, it's like we have two of Daisy on the team. If she's not here to just recklessly rush off into the unknown, then it's Andrew. That's no way to survive! We don't know what lurks in any of these whitewood islands!"

Athelstan unlimbered his Avalanche Spear and held it in two-handed fashion. "Dash ahead, and we will find out. Tread lightly, and we will find out. Either way, we will find out. One way's just faster than the other, and we don't have a lot of time to work with, now do we?"

After having to fight their way through over a hundred hellhounds scattered throughout the Chai Kingdom's Deep Wood, Warra and Neva finally made their way to Marissa's Mansion Lair. To Neva, the complex looked just as macabre and unsettling in the daytime as it did at night, if not more. Walking through the lawn towards the front doors was a delicate task. They were not sure what traps, if any, were hiding in the midst. Fortunately enough for them, they made it to the doors without having to deal with any. They assumed that Marissa deemed it unnecessary to place traps considering what her or her Sweeps could do with a flick of the wrist, not to mention the heavy presence of hellhounds lurking in close proximity.

Upon reaching the doors, Neva let frost drift over the knobs, after which Warra slammed down on them with one of his axes. They were not concerned with leaving a trail of evidence behind so much as they were about getting caught right then and there, so they decided to make their move quick and quiet. Better to spend one minute making an entrance rather than close to a half hour trying to find an inconspicuous way in.

With a grand main level that opened up to the second floor and down to the underground chambers, the two elemental wielders had many options to take. Warra's time on the Mekarsari Guard back at his homeland lent to him making the decision for them to stay on the main level and shift through to the back. As a result of not knowing the actual layout of the mansion, they went out one door Warra did not intend for them to exit and ended up in the backyard. The two elemental wielders then found themselves marching through the graveyard, confused and unsettled by the presence of burial grounds behind Marissa's Lair.

"What would she need with a graveyard?" Warra wondered aloud. "Is it something to do with her spells?"

"It could be a way of connecting the world of the living with the world of the dead," said Neva. "Don't quote me on that, though."

Warra looked around and took note of six larger tombstones that were each outlined with a special neon colored border – one in blue, one in black, one in brown, one in green, one in white, and one in purple. All other tombstones were basic, conventional shades of cobblestone and gray textures. He did not recognize any of their names, though they were archaic compared those of the present day.

The two spent just a few more moments scouting around the graveyard before going back inside the mansion. They moved through the dimly lit corridors, alert for any sound, movement, or energy signature. They came across several miscellaneous rooms of disinterest before entering one that looked as if it had been used within the past several hours. Disregarding the two abandoned cups of Hoolumbian coffee and the ornamental porcelain plates with food crumbs on a nearby table, the room appeared to be a combination

training room / casting chamber. An array of special, ancient artifacts of unknown value lay within a massive glass cabinet towards the back. Along one wall of the room were shelves of potions and serums. Lining the other side of the room was some sort of apparatus that was apparently designed to teach the user how to ride a Wiggler, though Neva wondered what the reasoning was for such considering that the demon witch's legion was made up of hellhounds.

"That's funny," said Warra. "You know, if I didn't know any better, that Wiggler training device looks to be about as old as those six highlighted tombstones out in the graveyard."

"Yeah," Neva replied. "Except this thing looks like it's been refurbished and restored over and over to try and mask its age." With a shift in tone, she added, "Let me guess; this is not what you thought we'd find?"

Warra shook his head. "I was hoping we would find something else, but I suppose no two buildings would be the same. I should have known that just from our mission at the Great Canyon, but I know that it's not going to be upstairs."

"Then that means we go down," replied Neva. Despite what she had just said, she walked towards the cabinet of artifacts in the back of the room, not making any attempt to hide her sly grin. Warra followed her and watched as she opened the door and pulled out what appeared to be an Alkemei Pendant of Power.

"Doesn't the big, friendly brown giant have one of these?" the Kruna of Ice asked.

"Yes, Athelstan does," Warra said with a frown. "And what do you think you're doing with that?"

"What?" Neva replied, coy in tone as she reached for the gem. "Wouldn't I look *really* pretty with some jewelry?"

"Put that back, Neva. We're already raising red flags just by being in here!"

"Then why don't you go hide in a box and hope nobody notices that? I'm taking this."

Warra was starting to get annoyed. "You don't even know what Alkemei that is! What if it's a Pendant of Self-Destruction? Or a Pendant of Sleep?"

"As long as it's not a Pendant of Turn-Me-Into-a-Whiny-Water-Wielder, I don't care," said Neva. She strapped the Alkemei around her neck, adjusting its thick metal necklace for a secure fit. The bulbous gem within the pendant turned white as a sign of its synchronization with Neva's ice energy. She then held up her hair as she tried striking some supermodel pose. "What do you think, Warra? Don't I look irresistible now? Aren't I a bonny lass? I bet I'm cuter than Daisy. Or are you just jealous now because you don't have one of these?"

"No, I'm not jealous," Warra responded. "But I highly suggest that you take that off and put it back where you found it. Yeah, you're having fun now, but when Marissa sees that we've stolen it-"

"What's she gonna do?" Neva said with a simper. "Level all of Sarasaland for a single Alkemei she had shelved and collecting dust? It's obvious that it's not being used. She won't notice it's gone..."

Chapter XXXVI

Unto the Cruel :

"It would have been far quicker and easier to do this back at the lair," muttered Marissa. "But like I said, I don't need her ransacking the joint should we...aggravate her. I don't care about these islands out here though – and no one should notice since we're technically 'trespassing' on these wildlife reserves here."

Tamara opened the portal on the ground, its appearance blowing wind and some of the sandy turf of the island around. The power King Boo had gathered in his arms was contorting the atmosphere around them. The royal spectre shifted all the shadow energy into his right arm and erected a massive clawed arm of darkness that he sent ripping down into the portal. It was one of the few times King Boo didn't have his trademark grin.

The moment King Boo locked onto something, he didn't hesitate in yanking his Shadow Claw back out of the portal. It was met with a hefty amount of resistance, but King Boo kept pulling. Marissa's Malocchio Eye pulsated a vibrant glow as the royal spectre continued trying to rip his captive out of the portal, and Tamara was doing all he could to ensure that the portal maintained its stability from the amount of power rippling through it on both sides.

Finally, King Boo managed to tear Deyanira the Dream Destroyer out of the portal and into this dimension. His Shadow Claw was wrapped around her and crushing her body to prevent her from escaping. Tamara cutoff the portal and watched Deyanira struggle and squirm in midair as she tried to break free. Her efforts were taking a toll on King Boo's power reserves.

"YEEEESSS!" Marissa yelled, fist pumping over and over again. "We got her! We GOT HER! YES! Do the impossible! See the invisible! Row row, fight the powah!"

"Don't you mean, 'Raw raw?' " asked Tamara.

Marissa's eyes went wide as she made a quick fidget. "Tamara! Just... Just would you... Can you just...okay?"

"I'll murder you all for this!" boomed Deyanira.

"You shoulda put your energy in this Power Vase the *first* time," said Marissa, childlike giggles sneaking out. "Joke's on you now! It's like they say; he who laughs last, laughs first, laughs last...or something like that, I think."

"Marissa!" King Boo screamed. He was having tremendous difficulty maintaining his hold on the fused titan.

"Oh yeah, sorry," the witch replied. She tapped into her Malocchio Eye, enforcing her will upon Deyanira. The titan refused to give in without a fight, and released an omnidirectional burst of light and shadow energy that smothered Marissa, Tamara, King Boo, and much of the island's features. King Boo still kept his hold on her and Tamara erected an octagram overhead that bound Deyanira with shackles of electricity.

Marissa forced her Malocchio's powers upon Deyanira again, this time with more haste. King Boo's Shadow Claw ran out and dissipated, but Marissa had already overwhelmed the titan's psyche. Deyanira's eyes went dull, then glowed to match the demonic golden-amber color of Marissa's own eyes. Lord Arkana's special fleur-de-lis Mark of the Witch appeared in prominence on Deyanira's forehead.

"Why don't you focus on me and not whatever's going on over there?" Kokoro said to Daisy. His remark was in reference to the large burst of light and shadow that filled the air over the same island she was staring at earlier.

The Kruna of Earth redirected her attention back to the Soul Stealer. "Look, I know this battle is important to us both, but it's like you said before; if Marissa succeeds in her plans with the Blood Moon, then this whole planet's screwed. That goes for the both of us – not just me, not just you. So why don't we call this off and postpone it for a

later date so that we can both go and stop whatever she's up to over there."

Kokoro gasped in disgust. "Are you serious?!"

Daisy nodded. "Whatever she's doing over there could very well be setting up an advantage for her when tomorrow comes around, making it more likely that she'll be able to beat my team and I. And if we don't beat her, you're not going to beat her."

Kokoro frowned at the conclusion of her last statement. To him, it sounded like Daisy had implied that her and her team were better than him. He clenched both his fists with enormous tension in his grip.

"Something gives me the feeling that my team is going to have their hands full when they get over there," Daisy continued. "So if you're not going to try and disrupt her plans, then at least let me get over there and lend my friends a helping hand."

"I don't believe this," Kokoro muttered. He began chuckling before breaking out into full on laughter. "You were so gung-ho about challenging me before, and now you want to call it quits? It's not like you to run from a challenge."

"I'm not running from anything," said Daisy with a grimace. "There's a higher priority that we need to acknowledge-"

"I *am* the highest priority you need to be concerned with," said Kokoro. "You're trying to slip out of this because you've realized that you've trapped yourself in a no-win situation. It's okay to fear, even for a life as pathetic as yours. We all have to die sometimes, you know. It's just that some must die sooner than others."

"Fine," Daisy muttered, scowling and grunting. "This fight's still on. I'll just have to make this real quick is all."

"That's better," Kokoro said, readying a sphere of light in with his prosthetic arm. "Although, how quick or slow this battle lasts depends on whether I snuff you out with haste or drag this out for as long as your body can withstand. Want to pick which limb I take first

or shall I surprise you and take them while you're not looking?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said Daisy. "Tormenting threats and such. I get it. You know, the more you talk, the more I'm glad that I'm staying here to pulverize you."

Warra and Neva made their way down to the third basement level in search of anything even remotely close to an armory. The basements didn't have the same breadth and width that the main level did, which must have been why there were multiples instead of one all-encompassing underground floor. All they found were deserted rooms and a strange, barely perceptible growling sound until they finally walked into the room that Warra had been looking for.

The mansion armory did not appear to be too impressive, as it housed very few elemental tools and a modest amount of magical implements. There were brooms, sceptres, batons, and staffs lining the wall-mounted racks, but substantially more interesting than those was the massive vat that took up the center of the room. A quick look within revealed that a translucent tan liquid filled it nearly to the brim. The table behind the vat had several bows and accompanying arrows. The heads of the arrows were attached with some sort of syringe-like device.

"This is very strange," Warra said. "This leads me to believe that these arrows are supposed to be filled with the liquid in this vat."

"Okay," Neva said. "But what's this liquid supposed to be in the first place? It looks like some sort of venom to me. Or fruit juice."

Warra's eyes shot wide open. "That's because it is venom! This must be the stuff that Marissa used to mutate Daisy! Betedaimon venom!"

"No," said Neva, shaking her head. "She told me the witch bit her. She didn't say anything about there being needles or arrows involved."

"Exactly. That means that the Betedaimon venom is not necessarily inherent to Marissa's body, but is the result of some sort of spell of hers. She must've used the spell on the spot when she dealt with Daisy, but she has this vat here in order to make a bulk supply of venom to use with these bows and syringe arrows!"

"But, why would she need such a large vat?" Neva wondered aloud.

"Maybe she was trying to target and transform us too," Warra said.

"But this much? If she bit into Daisy and was able to mutate her that way, then that means that we don't need a lot in our bodies to be affected by it. This is easily sufficient for hundreds – or maybe even thousands – of people!"

Warra picked up and inspected one of the bows, impressed with its supple design and awesome tension. *If Neva's taking that Pendant of Power, then maybe I should just take this bow,* he thought. *Marissa'll figure out that we've been here anyways-*

Before Warra could finish thinking, he heard a fit of growling at the doorway that made him drop the bow and take out his axes. He and Neva turned around to see Solovar and Naraka glaring at them. A group of hellhounds stood by the Black Mages' feet, waiting for the command to attack.

Mere moments after the massive burst of light and shadow, Bowser, Athelstan, Ramona, Andrew, and Marut made their way to Marissa's location from the eastern islands in time to see King Boo staring them all down, Marissa cackling, and Tamara restraining a now subdued Deyanira. It was a sight only the truly demented would love, but it seemed it would not last. Just as Marissa was certain she had Deyanira under control, the titan broke free from the witch's gaze and wrenched out of Tamara's binding spell. Now Deyanira was the one laughing. The Mark of the Witch remained on the titan's forehead, but she clearly exhibited no such loyalties for Lord Arkana just judging by the death glare she was giving the witch.

"Okay, great mission guys!" Marut cheered, turning around to head

back for the pipe. Bowser grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back before he took more than two steps.

Deyanira began scowling with contempt as she hovered higher into the air. "And now you're all here too? Alright. Whatever happens next, you brought on yourselves. Every last one of you."

"Yes, flatten them so that I can take all of their energy!" Marissa commanded.

"I don't take orders from you, witch," Deyanira said. "But thank you for this mark you've given me. I can feel it supercharging my body. I'll be able to flatten *you all* ."

Bowser and Marut went straight into their Torch Twister technique, the Kruna of Fire flaring a wall of flames and the Kruna of Air creating a tornado that originated right underneath the blaze. They sent their swirling torrent of fire at Deyanira, but the Dream Destroyer seemed amused. She erected a column of light from the ground beneath her to vaporize the Torch Twister into oblivion.

"You guys have gotten a little more powerful since last time," said Deyanira. "Just a little. You're still way out of your league."

Athelstan tapped into his Alkemei Odina to double his strength as he ripped a nearby idol free from the ground. He held it overhead as he wound back his right leg, then dropped the idol in front of him like a kickball to slam his Boot Club Additions into it. The idol rocketed at Deyanira and nearly knocked her senseless, much to the surprise of everyone else.

"What?" Athelstan said, putting his hands on his hips. "The idol is not conflicted about knocking people upside the head with its own head!"

"I swear; I don't even know what's going on anymore," Tamara mumbled to himself.

Deyanira straightened herself out and wasted no time in creating a Mental Blast that scattered the thoughts and consciousness of not only the Kruna but Tamara and King Boo as well. Marissa's

Malocchio Eye kept her protected from the psychic attack, but that didn't mean the demon witch wasn't upset about it.

"You're trying my patience, you ungrateful giant!" Marissa screamed.

"What are you talking about?" Deyanira asked. "You haven't done anything for me, so how am I the ungrateful one?"

" *You* have *my* mark on your forehead!" exclaimed Marissa. "I only gave you that mark to extract more energy from you because *you're* supposed to be under my influence; and under my influence, *you're* supposed to be putting all of your energy into that Power Vase! So at the very least, can you demolish these Kruna so I can extract their energy since you're being so stubborn?"

"What's the energy...supposed to be for in the first place?" asked Deyanira.

"I don't understand," Bowser said once his senses returned to him. "If Elkon's dead, then why is Deyanira still Deyanira?"

"Maybe the singularity holding her together is still there, but just unstable now," said Ramona. "In that case, one good shot to her core should split her back into Antasma and Cackletta."

"A special spell!" Marissa yelled at the Dream Destroyer. "That's all you need know. When the time comes tomorrow, you'll know why I've been gathering energy for my Power Vase!"

"I have a better idea!" Deyanira said, firing light and shadow energies into the ground beneath her. A large vortex opened up in which multiple, circular voids began to form. The voids scattered and flew away from the vortex, threatening to engulf and swallow anyone unfortunate enough to get caught in their path. It looked like a more powerful version of the technique she had used in the past that caught Warra. Aside from Marissa and King Boo, who both simply bolted up into the air, the Dream Destroyer's move forced all the Kruna and Tamara into evasive maneuvers to prevent from dropping through any of the pulsating voids. Dozens of the mobile pits appeared, though they tended to fade away once they got too far from their origin. Deyanira cut off her move and disbanded the

vortex when she noticed that everyone was having success with dodging it.

"You're all a filthy, dirty bunch!" Deyanira boomed. Her fingers twitched as a rapidly rotating shuriken of light appeared in one hand and an equal shuriken of shadow spinning in reverse appeared in the other. She got set to hurl them both down at the Kruna, though a sudden disturbance distracted her and prompted her to hold her attacks.

Marissa turned her head and saw a column of light shoot up through the air from one of the distant islands. She frowned, recognizing it as Kokoro's technique that always came from a grounded octagram. The Kruna all seemed to note it as well, but didn't react. They knew the battle between Daisy and Kokoro was well underway. Marissa, however, did not. Seeing as how there was a stop in action, Marissa channeled into the Remote Viewing of her Malocchio Eye to project her senses ahead and see the Kruna of Earth and the Soul Stealer going at it.

Now why would I stay here and burn off energy trying to deal with these fools? the demon witch thought. *Let Deyanira and the Kruna eradicate each other. King Boo can pick up the remains.* She made a quick glance at King Boo and gave him a subtle upwards nod, to which he cracked a smile in response. *I need as much of my own energy available for tomorrow, and I will be extremely pissed if I end up burning off more than necessary today. I don't want to have to waste time stealing Mushrooms.*

"What's going on over there?" Deyanira half-asked.

"Tamara!" Marissa yelled, unlimbering her Mystic Broom. "You're coming with me!"

Tamara scurried across the battlefield to join Lord Arkana as she took a seat on her broom, but Deyanira saw this and realigned herself to aim her two shuriken at the witch and the Black Mage.

"You drag me here and now you want to leave?" Deyanira bellowed. "I don't think so! You've got all the nerve in the world!"

The instant she uttered those words, King Boo blasted her in the back with a burst of shadow. The attack granted Marissa and Tamara the time needed to rise into the air and take off for the island, but Deyanira maintained the energy of her shuriken and hurled them at the two spellcasters before they got too far away. The Dream Destroyer didn't notice it at first, but Bowser, Ramona and Andrew had already sent bursts of their elements at Marissa and Tamara as well. Deyanira's shuriken both clashed with the fire, light, and shadow of the three Kruna and guaranteed a clean ride for the witch and her Sweep. As if Marissa's laughing wasn't enough as the two flew off, Tamara threw up a middle finger at the Kruna and shouted some sort of blatantly obscene remark.

"Damn it!" Bowser yelled, pointing a finger at Deyanira. "We were about to blast her right into the ocean before you threw your pitiable energy blades!"

"Pitiable energy blades that would have reduced you all to cold cuts," Deyanira said, blank in the face. She exchanged looks with each of the Kruna and with King Boo as she went on in mounting anger. "You bunch of little scumbags, I'm tired of having to deal with you mortal fools! I am a divine saint, and I have to sully my hands with you? No!"

Bowser smiled. "In my eyes, you'll always be that manic bean witch and that clown of a bat demon, fusion or not."

"And that means I hate you twice as much, Koopa King!" Deyanira boomed. "I could care less about these human scrubs you call 'equals' and that floating snowball with eyes and teeth over there. But see, you're all so unfortunate to be here, and that means you all will feel my hate for you, Bowser."

"Heh; like I care if you hate me," Bowser replied. "Just try and do your worst. Unlike you, I have a faithful, reliable team with me, and we're going far."

"Oh, yes, noble Koopa King," Deyanira murmured. "How could I expect anything less from a once great ruler who has since gone soft. I won't argue that there's no 'I' in 'team,' but there is an 'm' and an 'e' which spells 'me,' and that is all *I* need. You, however, will

require a lot more than your quivering lot of mediocre excuses for warriors. Observe as I discard you all along the ground like broken toys! That's about all you're each worth! I promise this next clash will be your last – prepare to embrace oblivion!"

Kokoro could not control the angry twitching in his face. He thought for sure he had caught Daisy in his Octagram Rising attack. He thought for sure that his technique went unseen until its activation. Instead, Daisy stood safe and sound right behind the now fading octagram of light.

"I'm wise to your tactics, Soul Stealer," said Daisy, making no effort to hide her contempt for him. "You will not defeat me with the same underhanded, cowardly tricks you used to slay my master."

After a couple moments of quiet, Kokoro made a little bit of a laugh, replying, "You're *really* a Nova Form warrior. Unfortunately, it won't do you a damn bit of good here. I can say with certainty that it's quite an overrated transformation! You may as well have just stuck to being some feral pet."

Daisy said nothing, only cracking a faint smile. Annoyed, Kokoro went on. "So-called 'heroes' like you are such archaic idealists whose interests are founded on fantasy rather than on the truth, and the truth is this world is ripe for the taking. Why bind yourself to moral obligations when at least half of the world fails to do so in the first place?"

Daisy spread her legs and arms in preparation for the next battle sequence. "I've got something to fight for. I've got purpose. It's my duty as a Kruna and as a resident of this world."

"Kruna," Kokoro muttered, shaking his head. "As if you could not give me any more reason to hate you. Kruna. What a failed lot you all are. Oh yes; I seem to recall extracting the soul of an unlucky Kruna of Air before chucking her body at the Piranha Plants. You guys are supposed to be some of the best elemental wielders on the planet? I don't think so."

Kokoro fired a golden laser, then immediately forced a special hand sign. Mid-flight, the laser expanded almost four times its original width and breadth. Even so, Daisy slipped just out of the way in time with minimal effort. Kokoro grunted in disgust as he watched his attack sail off into the distance and fade away with no fatality to show for.

Then Daisy went on the offensive, shifting around the sandy beach with more agility than Kokoro knew she was capable of. She threw a strike with the back of her hand the moment she got close to the fiend, then threw another with her other hand once he dodged the first. She kept dishing out similar attacks as Kokoro continued dodging them. Even the few that he blocked were only succeeded by more strikes.

The Soul Stealer tried staggering backwards to give himself some space, but Daisy kept close to him and did not let up with her strikes. The Kruna of Earth dropped down and knocked Kokoro off his feet with a breakdance-style sweep of her legs, then made an attempt to slam her knee into the fiend, only for him to catch it with his hands and push her away. She flipped out of the momentum and briefly resumed her attacks on Kokoro before transitioning into a Crystal Kick that tossed him to the side upon contact. Daisy then spent a chunk of energy materializing a slab of earth overhead to drop and crush him, but he reacted with quickness to swing a leg up and obliterate the mass. As he did that, his Master Pendant glowed and shot off a burst of pink energy at the Kruna of Earth. Daisy was ready for it though, and threw an uppercut to deflect the blast up into the sky. Kokoro let out a bit of power to repel the shattered mounds of earth around him, frustrated but aware of a shift in Daisy's style and flow as opposed to the previous two battles they engaged in.

Her movements, Kokoro said in his mind. *They contain the same ferocity and tenacity that they've had before...but they seem more...natural...more organic...*

"You!" Kokoro growled. "How did you make such drastic changes in so short of a time?!"

"I eat a lot of wholesome foods," said Daisy.

Then something in Kokoro snapped. He expected a far more easier fight than what had transpired so far. Daisy had an answer for pretty much every move he had come up with. *It's as if you're just standing there...taunting me,* he groused in his mind.

Kokoro's grimace intensified. "How...dare you play me for a fool!"

Daisy folded her arms and cupped her hands around her elbows, all but dropping her guard. "I should be preparing for the Blood Moon tomorrow, yet instead, I'm here battling you. From the way you've been carrying on ever since you came to Sarasaland, I was expecting more of a true challenge. But if this is the best you can come up with, you might as well go home."

Kokoro chuckled, but was even more mad in the face. "What's that saying... 'Like father like daughter?' Yes, you are as proud as King Sarasa is. Most definitely. But pride is the mask of one's own faults."

"There's a difference between confidence and blind vanity," replied Daisy. "If you ask me, you're more related to my dad than I am." That remark felt somewhat weird for her to say, for it seemed that the Master Pendant around Kokoro reacted to her words and gave off a quick flash. Kokoro didn't appear to be aware of his Alkemei's response, but it nonetheless left an unsettling feeling in Daisy.

The Kruna of Earth was going to say more but cut herself off when she noticed someone moving towards their island from the sky. She shifted her eyes to the side and up to see Marissa and Tamara flying in on the witch's broom and making a landing on the beach. Kokoro's gaze was locked on the two spellcasters who seemed more than elated to have both him and Daisy together in the same place.

"Boy, this week has gone by so quickly," said Marissa, disembarking her broom. "This month actually has went by quickly. Or rather, time is going by quickly. Or maybe I'm just too slow and time is speeding by. Or maybe I'm too fast, and I'm going through time so quickly that my brain can't decipher what's going on. What do you say, Sarasa girl? It's been just a little more than three weeks since your initial arrival to these lands. I do hope you're well aware of why I am emphasizing 'time,' for yours is just about up."

"I've got all the time I need," Daisy replied. "I can't wait for tomorrow to get here so we can show you what Kruna can really do!"

"How about I destroy you both now?" asked Kokoro. "That way, there is no tomorrow for either one of you?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Kokoro," said Marissa. "There are two thousand ways I could kill you both right now. And 1,893 of them hurt...a lot. It would certainly make tomorrow a little more anticlimactic than it was already slated to be...considering my 'competition,' that is."

"Then step forward and attempt those two thousand ways," Kokoro said. "I will succeed with one way, and that will be through your neck."

"Oh, so sorry," the demon witch replied. "You'll find my body is quite indestructible. And besides, I'm saving my power for something of more importance within the next thirty-six hours. Your power, though, I will need."

"We've been over this already," Kokoro hissed. "I'm not giving you a single bit of it!"

"Oh, I know that," said Marissa. "I intend to take." She reached into her pockets to grab the eight Green Mushrooms, though she only pulled out six in total. She handed them to Tamara as the green-clothed Sweep got off the broom, then tried to remember where she kept the other two Mushrooms. As Tamara set down the Mushrooms in a circular arrangement, curved lines of light appeared and linked each of them together.

"Oh yeah, that's right," mumbled Marissa. She stretched her shirt collar and reached down to pull out the remaining two Mushrooms she had tucked away inside. Tamara showed some reluctance about handling these last two when she tried to give them to him. Marissa got impatient and shoved them into his face, yelling, "Just take the damn things!"

"If you ran out of pockets, you could've said it beforehand," Tamara muttered. He put the last two Green Mushrooms on the ground to

complete the circle and then focused his energy to activate a spell. The Green Mushrooms took on a neon hue and glowed as the space between them filled with golden light after a hefty donation of energy from the green-clothed Black Mage.

"Soul Release," Tamara called out. A ring of light emerged and shot outwards from the circle of Green Mushrooms as the glow within their boundaries became jagged and erratic. From the central glow emerged a figure the same size as Athelstan, though he was definitely not human. No; his purple skin, pointy ears, and otherworldly navy-blue uniform gave that away. Daisy smiled once she recognized the figure as Tatanga, but frowned once she saw that it was not just a simple resurrection. It was more akin to a bizarre, unholy reanimation.

A wicked, occluding pink aura shrouded Tatanga as two long limbs extended from his form up to the sky. These limbs flared out to his sides as sizable, clawed wings that dispelled the cloud of energy surrounding him. Spikes emerged on the outside of his thighs and out from his back, coinciding with the formation of two branching horns on his head. His hands increased in size to resemble the clawed portion of his wings. The transformation came with a marked increase in power.

"Destroy them both," Marissa ordered. Tatanga's face was beyond unhappy as he laid his eyes on the Soul Stealer and the Kruna of Earth.

"And who is this supposed to be?" Kokoro asked.

"A pushover," said Daisy. "I say we just take him out quick so he's out of the way."

"I say 'every man for himself,' " Kokoro spat out.

"I am no pushover, Sarasa," Tatanga breathed. "Especially not now. For what you and that miserable little plumber did to me, I should have the force of my entire home planet come here and lay waste to your world."

Daisy smirked. "I should've gone with you and laid waste to *your*

planet just for your trespassing here!"

Tatanga shook his head. "You'd have to be many times more powerful than your current state to be able to accomplish something like that."

Daisy wanted to respond, but she heard loud footsteps coming from the tropical brush of the inner island. It was a sound she had grown all too accustomed to hearing at the most random and oftentimes inopportune moments. *Of course,* she thought. *Of course it'll follow us through the Warp Pipe.*

Metal Mario strolled into view and took up position not too far away from the scattered group of beings. Daisy leapt back to keep everyone in her periphery, and Kokoro and Tatanga both did the same. Marissa and Tamara both got back on her broom and levitated up into the air, anticipating what looked to be shaping into an all-out, free-for-all, four-man brawl.

"I'd ask what you two are doing snooping around here," said Solovar. "But a better question is, what are *you* doing with the Alkemei Hien?!"

"Alkemei Hien?" Neva repeated, clutching at her recently acquired gem. "So that's what this pendant's called? How do you work this thing?"

"Be careful with that!" Naraka demanded. "It is a most powerful tool!"

"I'm blasting it off her before she does anything with it," Solovar said, aiming a magical bolt of shadow at Neva. The white and black-clothed Sweep let loose his attack, only for Warra to step in and block with his axes. Neva's Pendant of Power made a quick flash and then maintained a steady shine.

"Trying to go for my jugular, huh?" Neva snapped at Solovar. She unlimbered her crossbow, expecting to fire off a string of ice arrows like she usually did, but something different happened instead. From her bayonet, the same mystic burst of shadows that Solovar used

emerged in place of her ice arrows and blasted him into the hallway. The secondary effect that would've been used on Neva then took action on Solovar and shot him up into the ceiling. The glow from Neva's pendant then faded.

"I just said to be careful with that!" shouted Naraka.

"What just happened?" Neva asked, frowning.

"You just copied Solovar's attack *exactly* !" Warra replied in awe.

"That's because the Alkemei Hien is the Pendant of Emulation," yelled Solovar before dropping back onto the floor.

"That must mean that you're able to copy whatever technique you just witnessed," Warra said to Neva.

"Oh, that's awesome," said Neva. "But that ate a ton out of my energy – I feel so tired now!"

"Which is why it'll do you good to give us back that pendant!" Naraka demanded again.

Solovar walked back into the room as the hellhounds began grunting and grumbling. "Give us the pendant, and we *might* consider letting you two walk out of here alive."

"I have a better idea," replied Warra, aiming his axes at the venom vat. "How about you let us go, and your reservoir of venom *won't* get smashed."

Naraka angled his eyes. "You wouldn't dare-"

"Try me," Warra said, his Aqua Axes beginning to glow.

Neva began chuckling. "Would be a shame if there were a little 'accident' in here."

Solovar and Naraka exchanged looks with each other, but after a few moments passed, they called for the hellhounds to part and grant exit from the room. Warra eased the charge in his tools and replaced them on his back. Neva put her crossbow away as well,

though kept a very skeptical look throughout.

"It is a long, energy-consuming process to make that much venom," said Solovar. "Get out of here. Lord Arkana would be severely displeased if the venom was lost in any way."

After a brief pause, Neva murmured, "I know."

Warra and Neva slowly made their way for the entrance and walked by the two Sweeps and the half-dozen hellhounds sniffing at their legs. Solovar and Naraka were being cautious in making their decision to let the two Kruna go, but Neva decided she wasn't finished yet. In one swift motion, Neva quick-drew her crossbow and fired an arrow of ice right through the side of the venom vat.

"Let's go, Warra!" Neva yelled. Without any hesitation, the two Kruna took off down the hallways to head for the stairs leading back up to the surface. Solovar and the hellhounds were about to pursue when Naraka stopped them.

"Never mind those two," said Naraka. "Forget them. Tomorrow, they'll perish for their actions of today. We must do something about this here and see how much of that venom we can salvage." He pointed to the broken vat from which the venom oozed out to spread onto the floor. They wouldn't have gotten a change to pursue anyways, for a large column of water shot through the hallway and bowled over the hellhounds.

Further up the corridors, Warra and Neva reached the stairs and began their ascent back to the surface, en route to a quick escape from the mansion before the other two Sweeps showed up. As they climbed the stairs, Neva noticed the upset look on Warra's face and asked him, "What?"

"Why did you do that, Neva?" Warra asked. "Breaking the vat and all; they said they were going to let us go anyways."

"Because I figured out what that venom was for," the Kruna of Ice replied.

Chapter XXXVII

Fiends' Playground :

"Would you look at us, Tamara," said Marissa. "We've got a front row seat for a 4-man beatdown! Isn't this exciting?! Can't you just smell the impending carnage?"

"And with us up here in the air, we're unlikely to be caught in their crossfire," added Tamara. "I almost wish I had some snacks for this."

Marissa thrust out her palm once and then tapped it with her opposite hand as she thrust a second time. A bucket of popcorn appeared in Tamara's hands.

Back on the ground, Daisy, Kokoro, Tatanga, and Metal Mario all stood spread at roughly an equal distance from one another. Daisy looked poised to attack, but that was only because that was one of her base stances. Kokoro was sitting back, Tatanga was hunched over and stable, and Metal Mario was looking around like it didn't now what to do with itself.

This is going to be an absolute brawl, Daisy thought. *It's gonna be every man for himself. Metal Mario seems like it's just going to be around to disrupt everything, but Kokoro and Tatanga are both more likely than not gonna primarily be targeting me.*

Kokoro looked to be the first one to break the cease in action. With his prosthetic arm, he siphoned a dose of the Master Pendant's power through to create an amplified burst of light. He held his attack in place, aimed squarely at Tatanga but still restricted to his hand, and let his eyes shift from the reanimated alien to Metal Mario and then to the Kruna of Earth. Daisy let her guard drop a bit when she noticed the Soul Stealer aiming at Tatanga, surprised that he wasn't going after her.

Heh, heh, heh; naive little fool, Kokoro thought, whipping around and firing off his blast at Daisy. The Kruna of Earth snapped back and

flipped into the air, clearing the burst. The moment she came out of her twist, she caught sight of Tatanga diving at her in the air overhead. The alien swung his leg down as he got close to Daisy, who managed to get an arm up to block in time, but the momentum transferred from his attack still sent her bolting back to the ground. As she checked herself by landing on her hands and feet, Metal Mario was already striding at her. When the metal body got close, however, it was struck in the back by a beam of light. Kokoro had fired off the attack with the intention of hitting Daisy, but Metal Mario had gotten in the way. As a result, the metal figure turned its attention away from the Kruna of Earth and went to attack the Soul Stealer.

Tatanga was still looping around and about overhead. Daisy got herself ready to dodge, anticipating a move from the alien that for her to counter. She turned a blind eye to Kokoro's repeated attacks on Metal Mario and focused fully on Tatanga, who threw down eight boomerangs of shadow energy at two different angles. A swift somersault and dash forward made for an easy evasion on the earth wielder's part. Tatanga caught the boomerangs as they each angled back towards him and combined them all into a wickedly revolving, bladed sphere of darkness that he whipped down at Daisy. There was no deflecting this attack, that much Daisy was able to tell right away. She didn't need to make any moves when the alien released it however, because Kokoro came flying into view right into the burst and took the hit instead. Neither Daisy nor Tatanga had noticed Metal Mario grab the Soul Stealer and fling him in their direction beforehand. Now the metal body marched towards them.

Angered and annoyed, Kokoro made a few handsigns in under a second to summon a modified version of his Octagram Rising technique. The octagram emerged over Tatanga and looked poised to shoot its light downwards, though Tatanga didn't notice what was going on until it was too late. The powerful radiance from Kokoro's move erupted from the octagram, the potent column of energy overwhelming and forcing the alien out of the sky and onto the ground. When the octagram had finished with its immense beam of light, Tatanga picked his scorched body up off the ground and creaked back to standing.

"Stay out of the air, you damn, freakish bat," Kokoro said.

"Aw man, that was brutal!" Daisy exclaimed.

"Good," replied Kokoro. "You're next."

"Quite the predicament now huh, Sarasa girl?" Tamara called out from above.

Metal Mario took the opportunity to capitalize on everyone's distraction and latched onto Daisy. It whipped her up into the air, attempting to slam her down with a bone-crushing throw into the ground, but Daisy maneuvered out in a reversal and grabbed onto the metal body by the upper arm. Her reflex was to punch it a few times before throwing it, but she stopped herself once she remembered it was made entirely of metal and cut straight into a throw to send it flying at Tatanga. The alien saw Metal Mario heading toward him and charged a dense shroud of shadow energy into his right leg to act as a protective sheath as he wound up to kick the incoming metal figure at Kokoro. The archfiend would have made an attempt to send Metal Mario hurtling at Daisy had it not curled into a ball to become a projectile mid-flight. The Master Pendant sent out a short reverberating wave to reduce Metal Mario's momentum to nothing. As Daisy watched Metal Mario and Kokoro to see what they were going to do next, Tatanga blasted a bolt of shadow energy at her, striking her just offset the middle of her back.

"Oww!" Daisy grunted. "Why you little-"

"Maybe you should pay better attention," said Tatanga. "The moment I catch you with your eyes elsewhere is when you become my target."

Kokoro managed to get off a burst of light in time before Metal Mario gave him a crushing punch to the torso. The Soul Stealer's attack pummeled Daisy in a similar manner to Tatanga's. Daisy was about to charge at him when she stopped herself and turned around in time to see Tatanga already aiming another one of his bladed shadow spheres at her. She made a couple quick cuts to the side and away to mess up the alien's aiming, but in the process dashed right into Metal Mario. Compressive forces overtook her trunk as she

took a nasty kick from the metal figure sufficient enough to knock all the air from her lungs. Skidding along the ground she went, though she snapped back into stance the moment she could catch a breath of air.

"Hey, Sarasa girl!" shouted Marissa. "Maybe you should click your boots together three times! It might work better than whatever it is you think you're doing now!"

"No way!" Daisy yelled. "I'm rockin' this land! Releasing pain and letting ya'll know that I'm the flower of the hour – the tower of power!"

"More like, target of the hour," Tamara said with a snicker.

The four fighters down on the ground stopped, spread in a triangle with Metal Mario taking up the center. Each one waited to see who was going to attack who next. Everyone seemed to show a general dislike for one another, but so far, it seemed that Daisy had the short end of the stick. Even with her Nova Form working for her, having to deal with an overpowered Kokoro, Metal Mario and its foolishness, and a reanimated, warped Tatanga all at once was a tall order to handle.

Daisy's expression darkened, but she kept a confident look. *That's fine,* she thought. *It's just gonna have to require a little more effort on my part. Maybe this would be the perfect opportunity to try out my new technique...*

"Feel my divine wrath, earthbound scum!" Deyanira echoed to the heavens. With a violently spasming swing of her arm, she sent down a crackling orb of light that seemed to mimic electricity in its makeup. The Kruna all spread out, though it appeared that a target had already been cast. Seeing the pulsating burst coming his way, Marut blew a gust of wind to divert it up and away. Unfortunately for him, the orb angled back around at him again.

Startled, Marut put away his ninjato and took off to try and confuse and outrun the blast. The others watched as their air teammate ran

around the sandy battlefield. They expected the attack to faze out at some point, but it just kept pursuing him. Marut maintained his distance from the attack, though he struggled to gain any ground. He began panicking, then freaked out as King Boo rained down scattershot shadow bursts from above.

"HELP ME MIYAMOTO!" Marut screamed, running around in a wide circle. "HELP ME SAKURAI! HELP ME NOMURA! SAKAGUCHI!"

"The hell is he on about?" Bowser asked, taking aim with his Blazer Claws. He let loose a beam of plasma at Deyanira, who was too focused on Marut to notice. King Boo saw the incoming attack but couldn't react in time. Deyanira endured moderate damage from the blast, though the electrifying orb of light that had been following Marut dispersed and eroded into the atmosphere.

"Seriously; what were you talking about?!" Bowser asked Marut as the green-clothed Kruna ran back to the group.

"Huh? I don't know," Marut replied, shrugging. "I was just shouting stuff 'cause I didn't wanna get hit. I thought it would make me go faster."

Before the Kruna could do anything else, Deyanira let loose a powerful Mental Blast that knocked all five of the assembled elemental wielders off of their feet. King Boo was kept safe on account of him being out of Deyanira's eyesight. The royal spectre watched Deyanira laugh as the Kruna reeled about. He knew he wanted to have minimal impact on the current conflict until everyone else was worn out, but he also wasn't against throwing out some attacks of his own every now and then as he did moments ago.

By the time the Kruna had all regained their bearings, they looked up to see six Deyaniras surrounding them. They had seen this technique from the Dream Destroyer before in their previous encounter, though they didn't have a very good response to it last time. The six Deyaniras all focused their energies to create twelve spheres of light and hurled them down at the Kruna.

"Everybody, get around me!" Marut said, positioning himself for his new move.

As Bowser, Ramona, Athelstan, and Andrew got near him, Marut grabbed hold of his ninjato and flared a combination of gusty winds and static around him and his teammates. With two lightning-quick spins of his body and the usage of a good chunk of his energy, he created his Dome Rotation. It was a special defensive move that made a dome-like barrier of rapidly rotating winds and static electricity that gave a couple seconds of protection all around him and anyone nearby, and it worked at that moment to not only block the spheres of the Deyaniras but to also deflect them into four of the Deyaniras. Of the four hit, one did not immediately disappear, meaning that the real Deyanira had been outed. The other two remaining fake Deyaniras shattered and faded away as the real one looked upon the Kruna with indignation. Then the real one disappeared into a veil of shadows and faded away too.

"What happened?" Ramona asked. "Where did she go?"

"Wait, is she actually gone?" asked Athelstan.

"Maybe she is!" Marut exclaimed.

"Are you saying she would just run away after that?" asked Bowser.

"Well, why not?" Marut replied. "Maybe she realized she would've lost! Unless..." He cut himself off and made a few skeptical, self-doubting glances around the battlefield, remembering that Deyanira could teleport. A few moments passed, but it stayed quiet. "Nope! See? Gone! Glad that's all over-"

A cloud of darkness emerged not too far from the Kruna, receding to reveal Deyanira in the process of charging her energies for some sort of special move. Her whole body pulsated with alternating glows of gold and purple.

Bowser looked at Marut and threw his hands up. "I'm glad that's all over too!"

"Oh, she was just playing possum is all!" Andrew yelled. "She must've been trying to make sure she wouldn't be disrupted while she readied her next attack!"

Deyanira's whole upper body inflated to twice its size as waves of her energy fluttered around her. From underneath her floating form, several small voids scattered and shifted along the now tremoring ground, followed by streaks of light and shadow bolting up from the ground in randomized fashion. It seemed like the beginning of a more powerful form of an attack she had used in their first encounter.

"Don't fall in!" shouted Andrew. "She's going to send a whole bunch of those holes at us!"

Sure enough, the voids then spread out and headed for the Kruna. They did a very good job evading the moving holes, for all the holes managed to trap were a couple scattered idols. The voids closed up and faded once they got too far away from Deyanira, but the Kruna were well within range, and the titan just kept sending them out in droves as her energy lit up the battlefield. The Kruna weren't going to be able to dodge forever though, and they had little time to get off any attack. Marut and Ramona both got off bursts of their elements, but their aim was off and closer to hitting King Boo than Deyanira. The voids picked up their pace, flowing outwards faster than before.

Just when it seemed that the Kruna were all but guaranteed to be cast into the nightmare world within the Dream Destroyer's many voids, a bulky figure emerged from the trees towards the inner portion of the island and leapt long and high into the air. Deyanira was too focused on the Kruna to react in time and took a massive, smashing punch into her shoulder by the newcomer. The sheer force behind the punch momentarily stunned the Dream Destroyer and allowed the Kruna an opportunity to regroup as the titan's voids faded. Within moments, Deyanira shrunk back down to her original – yet still significant – size. Once the new figure landed nearby, it didn't take long at all for Bowser and Andrew to recognize him by his iconic tie and stature, even with the adventure hat he wore and the large olive green backpack he carried.

"Donkey Kong! My brother!" Andrew shouted. DK ran up to the Kruna of Shadow, and the two bumped fists.

"You two know each other?" Bowser asked. Donkey Kong made a couple grunts and gave the Koopa King a thumbs up.

"This dude bailed me out a ways back when I was ambushed by brigade of Kremlings," said Andrew. "He looks like he's here now to kick some more tail!"

"DK! Donkey Kong!" the ape bellowed, slapping fives high and low with Andrew.

Deyanira grimaced and scowled as she loomed overhead of Donkey Kong and the five Kruna. "I've had enough of this!"

"And so have we!" Bowser yelled. "Athelstan! The pendant! Throw me!"

The Kruna of Stone nodded and activated his Pendant of Strength as Bowser retracted into his shell. Athelstan ran over and picked up Bowser from underneath, then pulled back and heaved him at Deyanira. To top it all of, the Koopa King went into his Whirling Fortress technique to make for a crushing hit the moment he slammed into Deyanira's abdomen. While Deyanira reeled from the last hit, Athelstan shot up a few sandy platforms for Donkey Kong to use to ascend up near the titan and deliver his Giant Punch in right around the same area Bowser had hit her.

In spite of the force behind both Bowser and Donkey Kong's attacks, the Dream Destroyer was more aggravated than she was hurt. Ramona looked at the angered deity and got a bad feeling in her stomach, fearing that they had yet to see the true breadth of Deyanira's powers. King Boo watched with uncertainty, unsure if he should try to intervene and at least make the battle more interesting, for if Deyanira were to slaughter the six down below with ease, she would have plenty of power left over to take out on him too.

"Pests!" screamed Deyanira. "You are all PESTS! You are nothing compared to me! This whole world is infested with vermin! I should destroy this entire planet like I was supposed to before Elkon saved you all!" She threw her hands up high, conjuring a giant ball of light interlaced with tendrils of darkness. With each passing second, her conglomeration of energy grew and expanded outwards, simultaneously lighting up and casting shadows on the beach below. The amount of power behind her light and shadow ball made a substantial distortion in atmospheric pressure and forced out wind in

all directions.

"No way!" Athelstan called out. "No way, no way!"

"Well that's great," Marut mumbled. "That's just so great, man! Now what are supposed to do? What a load of crap that we're in now!"

Bowser grabbed Marut by the collar of his tunic and shook him up. "Get it together, bro!"

"The hell you mean 'get it together,' Bowser?" Marut said. "That's it, bro; game over, bro! GAME OVER, BRO! What are we supposed to do now?"

"Just sit there and accept your annihilation!" shouted Deyanira. "You and this miserable planet will be reduced to nothing but DUST!" Her voice projected so strongly, it echoed several times throughout the atmosphere.

"You wouldn't," said Andrew.

"You don't think so?!" Deyanira snapped. "JUST WATCH ME!"

Suddenly, the titan's body flashed with strobe-effect illumination. Her massive ball of energy disbanded and dispersed, and she found herself paralyzed. The Kruna and King Boo watched as the Dream Destroyer underwent a very brief metamorphosis that split her apart into her two constituent beings. Antasma and Cackletta both went hurtling across the sandy beach opposite each other, and the gravitational singularity that held their fusion together broke down and evaporated into the ether.

"What – what just happened?" asked King Boo.

"Looks like that gravitational singularity finally became unstable," said Athelstan. "It held up for quite a while. That must've been the last remaining mass of energy from Elkon."

"Are you trying to say that that's the only reason she existed?" asked King Boo. "Then who are these two punks supposed to be?"

Antasma and Cackletta shot up from the ground to survey the

environment. They were both dazed, confused, and semi-conscious, but alert enough to notice that they were somewhere new and that they no longer shared a unified body.

"Oh great," King Boo muttered. "Now what?"

Antasma stared down Cackletta with an expression of scorn. "Never again."

"Why?" Cackletta asked. "You have to admit, we were *godly* together!"

"Never again," Antasma repeated.

"HEY!" King Boo shouted at the batlike creature and Beanish witch. "What happened? Where's Deyanira?"

"We *were* Deyanira," said Cackletta. "And we were damn good at it, isn't that right, Antasma?" She shifted her gaze only to see that Antasma had already started flying off into the distance. It took her a moment, but her expression darkened once she realized what he was about to do. With another, scornful look at the Kruna and Donkey Kong, she took off and chased after the batlike being.

King Boo recognized that Antasma and Cackletta were both flying in the direction that Marissa and Tamara had went in earlier, though he couldn't tell what the two hoped to accomplish. They could not hope to confront Lord Arkana, separated and weakened as they were. He decided he needed to follow them and see what they would try to do, if they tried anything. He looked at the six beings on the ground, all of which were focused on the two fleeing entities.

I don't need them trying to follow too, King Boo thought. He charged a massive burst of shadow energy and shot it at the Kruna, but in his haste, he misfired. His burst hit the ground just in front of Andrew and Bowser, and although it didn't do any damage to anyone, it provided him some temporary cover to escape. In the few seconds it took for the residual energy from King Boo's attack to clear up, the royal spectre was already far off in pursuit of Antasma and Cackletta.

"Now where are they all off to?" Athelstan asked.

"Not a clue," Marut said. "Or, no wait a minute; isn't that in the direction of-"

"Ramona! Andrew!" exclaimed Bowser.

"Can't," the Kruna of Shadow replied, already knowing what his fire teammate was going to ask. "I don't have enough energy to bridge the portal with her."

"And I can't compensate for him with this particular technique," added Ramona.

Bowser's grimace intensified. "Well we need some way to get over there! Daisy'll be surrounded by fiends from all directions! Maybe she can handle two at a time, but six?!"

"I got an idea," said Athelstan. "But it's gonna be a little slow!"

"That's fine," Bowser replied. "It'll be a lot faster than going all the way back around to the Warp Pipe we took and looking for the other Warp Pipe Daisy and Kokoro took, I'm sure. Let's not waste any more time now!"

Athelstan nodded and motioned for everyone to gather near him. He then thrust his Avalanche Spear skyward to pry the chunk of land they were standing on out of the island beach and into the air.

"Steady it, man," said Andrew.

"Cool; thanks for telling me how to use my own element," Athelstan replied. With great focus, he set their platform in motion in the direction that Cackletta, Antasma, and King Boo flew off in.

Chapter XXXVIII

They Will Not Repent :

Marissa gritted her teeth with indignation as she surveyed the scene. The four-way standoff had grown surprisingly tense, and she was getting impatient. Daisy had been holding her own much better than the demon witch thought she would. Either Marissa had overestimated Tatanga's might, or Daisy had somehow improved hers within the last two weeks.

The demon witch glanced down at Tatanga, her eyes wide and alert. "Do it! Take her DOWN!"

Daisy's face was beyond serious as she shifted her stare from Tatanga, to Metal Mario, and to Kokoro, each in turn. She knew the slightest flinch from her or any one of them would cause the others to react. They were probably just as ready to breakout of their stationary stances as her. Tatanga looked focused, but confused, as if what he had seen from Daisy was more than he expected. Metal Mario was...being Metal Mario, clueless and almost impossible to read. For several moments more, no one dared move.

On the impression that he thought he saw someone else shift, Kokoro jolted forward a half-step, but caught and stopped himself. Even so, Metal Mario took it as an attack attempt and advanced towards the Soul Stealer with its slow, trudging jog. And just like that, the action was back on.

Tatanga flew at Daisy, shadows swirling around his legs as he wound up and twisted through the air to turn himself into a makeshift drill. Daisy leapt into the air just as the reanimated alien got close, then pulled back down in a somersault to make a quick return to the ground in time to catch Kokoro trying to swipe at her and Metal Mario swinging its fists around. On instinct, the Kruna of Earth broke down to the ground and spread her legs as she spun around on her upper back to knock Kokoro and Metal Mario away. She then sprang back to her feet and punched the ground to send a seismic

shockwave rippling through the beach in all directions, the maneuver launching Kokoro and Metal Mario further from her. Tatanga was about to touch down on land, but decided not to once he noticed the incoming wave. He whipped back into an aerial loop, transitioning into a stationary hover at the apex of his maneuver.

Daisy had shifted her focus to Tatanga. In the process of readying her Seismic Wave to try and draw the reanimated alien out of the air, she did not see that Kokoro had already recovered and leapt at her. The Soul Stealer slammed a kick into her waist with enough force to create an echo throughout the island. Daisy went wickedly twisting around in the air as she soared across the field. The brutal hit nearly knocked her unconscious, but she kept herself awake and stuck her feet down into the sand to try and slow her momentum. With an outburst of energy, she stopped herself, but the length of the skid marks on the beach said enough for everyone else who didn't experience that last kick firsthand. Even Marissa was surprised by the force behind Kokoro's attack.

The projection of Daisy's Nova Form hair out and over her forehead obscured her face as she stood with her head down and her body in a very tense position. Kokoro smiled, expecting to see a look of agony and shock on the Kruna of Earth's face. Instead, Daisy straightened herself out and stood tall, her expression as intense and determined as ever.

Kokoro frowned, scowling and grunting in anger. "Why am I not surprised. You humans are like a bunch of flies; swat at them and they just keep coming back. You've got to crush them and smear their guts on the window before they finally stop."

Daisy began walking back towards the group. Kokoro brought an arm up to conjure an attack, but Metal Mario laid down a jarring hit in the archfiend's back just as Tatanga rained down a spinning tendril of four shadow spheres to blanket them both. Metal Mario grabbed Kokoro and chucked him into the air, at which point Tatanga dove down in a dive domb to grab hold of Kokoro and sling him into the metal figure. Just after getting released but before crashing into Metal Mario, Kokoro whipped a spheroid of radiant energy at Tatanga to knock the alien on his back. Daisy stopped moving once she felt she was at a good enough distance as all three of her

opponents scrambled back to their feet.

They're fighting against each other again, Daisy thought. *Now would be the time to use my new technique...* She crouched down a bit and brought back her left hand in a fist as she pushed her right arm out in front of her. She used her outstretched hand as a sort of targeting gesture while she charged seismic energy through to her other hand.

Marissa narrowed her eyes on the Kruna of Earth. "Hey! Just what do you think you're doing over there? Get over here and mindlessly fight those other three!"

Kokoro snatched up Metal Mario by the head and tossed it across the field in Daisy's direction. The metal body landed a good distance short and flopped onto the ground, but Kokoro and Tatanga both rushed towards Daisy. Metal Mario bounced around a little and flipped back to its feet to advance towards the Kruna of Earth as well.

C'mon, Daisy urged in her mind. *Get close, get just a little bit closer...*

Kokoro and Tatanga were about to pass Metal Mario when all three of them finally got near enough for Daisy to unleash her technique. She pulled back her left fist further and thrust it forward, opening up her hand as she did so to spray her seismic energy in a wide arc. The move's range was very short but went in every direction from the edge of her pinky to the point of her thumb. The attack struck Kokoro, Tatanga, and Metal Mario like a barrage of cinderblocks as the energy rumbled through the nearly 180-degree angle of range from her hand. Within just a couple seconds, Daisy had sprawled out all three of her opponents on the sandy beach.

"Shotgun," Daisy whispered with a smile. Although impressive, the technique was not enough to keep Kokoro, Tatanga, or Metal Mario down. After several moments, they all managed to return to their feet, albeit disoriented and loose in their statures. Daisy didn't seem bothered by their resilience to her move though. She was more glad about successfully using the Shotgun for the purpose she intended for it rather than only hitting one person with it. Her opponents stood

across from her and looked ready to continue, but the attack did put a large dent in their vitality on account of how close she had let them drift before releasing it.

"I don't understand this..." grumbled Kokoro. "How is a pale, overgrown monkey like you holding up this long, causing such a disturbance?"

Daisy shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe it's because I just train harder than you."

"Ooh; the Sarasa girl with a burn," said Tamara.

Kokoro started chuckling. "Who needs training when I have *this* ." He fiddled with the Master Pendant around his neck.

"A lot of good that's doing you," said Daisy. "Why don't you just take it off and chuck it into the ocean?"

"And why would I do that?" asked Kokoro. "I'm not finished with it yet. I won't be finished with it for *quite* a while." He turned to Tatanga. "Whatever planet you hail from, be glad it's not infested with these appalling primates we call 'humans.' "

"Ah, well, I was very close to getting away with that female fighter over there," Tatanga said, pointing at Daisy.

"And just what do you hope to accomplish with capturing someone?" asked Kokoro. "You can just as easily kill them on the spot, admire your own handiwork, and then leave and let someone else clean up."

"Ah yes, well, that was not a part of my plan," replied Tatanga, staring at Kokoro's Master Pendant. "You see, our planet's population is small, but our resources and technology are vast and incredibly efficient. So efficient, in fact, that the only sources of energy capable of supporting it all are the natural energies ripely stripped from other organisms."

Daisy cupped her elbows in her hands. "And since your race is so unwilling to donate their own energy, you all like to forcefully take it away from others."

"Yes," Tatanga flatly replied. "Although you alone would not have been enough to satisfy our needs. It's an ongoing process. I see now more than ever why I had taken you. Though, it was pretty bizarre how willing your father was to hand you over, even if it meant us not decimating the lands here and taking everyone else in your place. It's almost as if there were others on your planet with even more power that he wanted to hide from me. That one other human that destroyed me before certainly seemed like his power was no less than on par with yours."

Daisy frowned at the end of the resurrected alien's statement. "I don't need to be told that Mario's better than me. I bet I could take him down, 1v1. Don't underestimate me."

"That was the name of that cretin?" asked Tatanga. "Mario? I'll have to hunt him down..."

"Mario?" Marissa asked.

"Mario..." Kokoro mumbled. "That scrub is actually a formidable combatant?"

"Tamara," said Marissa. "Is Purple Alien Dude referring to that overalls-wearing fella with the hat and moustache?"

"I believe it's pronounced 'mustache,' and yes," replied Tamara. "He's a proven fire wielder and is supposed to be quite the superpower over on the western side of the world."

Marissa giggled. "Well, maybe when our business is finished here, we should take a visit to the west and see for ourselves?"

Having not heard any of Marissa and Tamara's little conversation up above, Daisy kept her focus on the three figures directly in front of her. Metal Mario remained stationary and silent, as if it were waiting for the next attack, but no one appeared ready to make one. Kokoro and Tatanga had been exchanging words on their encounters with the renowned Mushroom Kingdom hero.

"So he caused you that much trouble?" Kokoro asked. "And here I am thinking he and his green counterpart were nothing more than

nuisances."

"In fact..." Tatanga muttered, pointing at Metal Mario. "That thing over there looks a lot like him."

Kokoro squinted his eyes. "Yeah, you're right. It does, doesn't it?"

"Hey, you pay attention to me," Daisy said. "You go after either Mario or Luigi, and all eight of us Kruna will be on your neck. Literally."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that," said Kokoro. "Because I will eradicate you eight first." He turned to address Tatanga. "And you; for going after such inferior creatures like humans, you deserved to have been killed off. If you really wanted a massive source of power to draw from, you should've gone after me."

Before anything else could be said, a dark figure flew out of the sky and hovered over the battlefield across from Marissa and Tamara. Antasma had made his way over from the other island, disgruntled and angry. His frown looked considerably ominous.

Daisy gazed up and caught sight of the bat-like being. *Who's that?* she thought. *I don't remember seeing him before...unless...*

A second entity flew up to join Antasma, equally as distraught and furious. Daisy could not recognize Cackletta either, on account of only seeing her and Antasma fused together as Deyanira. Kokoro, Tatanga, and Metal Mario were all just as clueless as to what was going on. Marissa and Tamara did not move from their perch on the witch's Mystic Broom, but neither Antasma nor Cackletta looked ready to start a fight despite their obvious agitated fury.

For a while, an eerie, uneasy stare down transpired in the air, during which King Boo flew over and took up position next to Marissa and Tamara. Daisy unfolded her arms, sensing something very wrong in the atmosphere.

"Marissa," King Boo said. "Due to some circumstantial – and untimely – phenomena, Deyanira has split into these two beings here."

Antasma and Cackletta! Daisy thought. *But how did Deyanira get here? And why?*

"Where's the Power Vase?" Antasma asked.

Sparkles formed around Marissa's hand as she waved a circle in the air with it to materialize the Power Vase right in front of Antasma. With a few finger movements from the witch, the top popped off.

"I'm so glad you see it my way," said Marissa.

"What? No!" Daisy yelled, wide-eyed. "Don't do it!"

Tatanga, Kokoro, and Metal Mario all turned around to look up into the sky. Antasma let his energy flow into the Power Vase under Marissa and Tamara's watchful eyes. The bat-like being left just a meager fraction for himself by the time he finished his deposit.

"Destroy them, Marissa," Antasma breathed. "Destroy them all. Wring their bodies dry and slaughter every last one of them."

Marissa started stroking her chin as if there was some imaginary beard she had been growing. "What say you, Greenie Beanie?"

"HEY!" Daisy screamed at the group hovering in the air. "You two need to get out of here! Don't give your energy to that demon witch!"

"Sarasa girl, pay attention to the three in front of you and mind your own business," said Marissa. "While you're at it, go suck beans."

"All the beans, Lord Arkana?" asked Tamara. "All of them?"

"Yes, Tamara!" Marissa shouted. " *All* the beans!"

"Maybe I should be offended by that," said Cackletta. "But at this point, I care more about smashing these bloody elemental wielders." She hovered over to the Power Vase and raised her arms to begin siphoning the lion's share of her energy into it.

"I'm not gonna let you do that!" Daisy exclaimed, taking off in a mad dash. She breezed past Tatanga, Kokoro, and Metal Mario and lined herself up to a stop in a position just offset that of Marissa and

Tamara's aerial perch. *The Seismic Wave's my only ranged technique, and even that's still limited in scope,* shethought. *I just gotta try and project it as far as I can. They're not too far up, I think-*

Her muse was cutoff by a burst of light that struck her square in her back and knocked her face first onto the ground. She twisted and rolled onto her hands and feet to see Kokoro running full speed at her. With little time to react, she propelled herself back up to standing and into a furious exchange of punches and blocks with the Soul Stealer.

"Hey man, back off!" Daisy growled. "You see what's happening right above us, don't you?"

"And?" said Kokoro, speeding up his strikes. "I'd rather make sure you die before I concern myself with the witch and her affairs!"

"Stubborn bastard," Daisy snapped. "I *really* hate you right about now!"

"The feeling's mutual!" Kokoro shot back. The Master pendant glowed, coinciding with a punch that, even though Daisy blocked, knocked her back a considerable distance and would have sent her into the water had she not checked herself as soon as she did. She found herself stunned for a few seconds, but by the time she got the chance to look up, Cackletta was already siphoning energy into the Power Vase.

"Damn it..." Daisy muttered. "Too late..."

Cackletta nodded as she finished her energy transfer just in time for Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, Andrew, and Donkey Kong to ride in on the Kruna of Stone's sandy platform. Athelstan dispersed his elemental mass to drop everyone into a safe landing near Daisy. Kokoro, Tatanga, and Metal Mario remained spread across the field, taking note of the newcomers but maintaining their positions.

Antasma's expression intensified as he laid eyes on the Kruna. "I hope you all rot in Hell."

"As cliché as this may sound, you haven't seen the last of me,"

Cackletta hissed. "Of course, that will be false should this witch stay true to her word and do away with you all."

Having given the Kruna a death stare, Antasma glowed and took off through the air into the distance. Cackletta maintained her death grin as she left and flew off in another direction. The Power Vase started to give off a heinous, pulsating pink glow as Tamara directed it to drift into his hands.

"Oh my, the Power Vase is getting quite full," said Marissa. She paused for a moment, staring at Tatanga with some lustful look in her eyes. "Quite full, but not full enough..."

Bowser tilted his gaze at Tamara and breathed fire at the green-clothed Sweep, attempting to destroy the Power Vase. Ramona sent a beam of light from her broadsword to follow Bowser's fire from behind. As the light bolted through the air and the burst of fire, the flames contorted and intertwined around the radiant beam.

"Bad move, Kruna" said King Boo. Tamara opened the lid to the Power Vase and pointed the opening at the incoming blast. The vase vacuumed in the fire and light energies in their entirety and left no trace of them behind. Tamara replaced the lid, much to the dismay of the Kruna down below.

"Wanna try that again?" asked Tamara.

"No, I think we're good," Ramona whimpered.

"We're still not to capacity just yet, Lord Arkana," said Tamara.

"Not yet, huh," said Marissa. She stared at Tatanga again, this time with more focus. Daisy caught the demon witch eyeing the reanimated alien and knew immediately what Marissa was thinking.

"What are you looking at me for?" Tatanga asked the witch.

"You're no longer of any use to me, are you, Tatanga..." murmured Marissa.

"What did you just say?" asked Tatanga.

"Capture, Tamara," said Marissa.

Tamara handed the Power Vase to Marissa and struck eight different hand signs in rapid succession. He then thrust his arms forward, allowing magical chains to shoot from his sleeves and home in on the alien. Tatanga took off into the air, but the chains curved around and followed him up. Tamara's chains pursued Tatanga as the alien dove around and maneuvered through the air, their length seemingly undefined. Despite not being able to shake them off, Tatanga kept the chains from latching onto him; that is, until a wide ray of light from Kokoro struck Tatanga and slowed him enough for the chains to wrap around his torso and arms and bind him in midair. Satisfied with the catch, Tamara reeled in the chains to pull Tatanga over to him and Marissa. The Kruna looked at Kokoro as if the Soul Stealer had gone mad.

"And what did you do that for?!" Daisy snapped at the archfiend.

"Better him than me," Kokoro replied.

Daisy charged at Kokoro, irate and with a fist pulled back overhead and ready to strike. Just before she got close to him however, a bright flash lit up the sky. Tamara's chains ripped all but a fraction of Tatanga's power free from his body, much of it escaping into the atmosphere, but enough of it flowing into the Power Vase to fill it to capacity. On Marissa's command, Tamara yanked on the chains once more and then slung them in a sidearm motion to snap Tatanga off into the distance. The alien's motionless body plummeted into the ocean. Frightened by the demon witch and her Black Mage assistant, Metal Mario flinched and ran off towards the inner zone of the island shrouded by tropical trees, idols, and plantlife.

"The name of the game for tomorrow has just changed," said Marissa, caressing the Power Vase. "How does it feel to know that your doom has been sealed?"

"Destroy the Power Vase!" Andrew called out. Marut brought in a gust of wind to try and knock the Power Vase free from Marissa's clutches, but Tamara called forth a gust of his own to negate that of the Kruna of Air's. While Daisy was looking up at Marissa and

Tamara, Kokoro leapt forward and threw a kick into her back. The Kruna of Earth tumbled along the ground before coming to a stop not too far from her teammates.

"Hey! Whose side are you on?" Bowser yelled.

" *My* side," replied the Soul Stealer.

"Cheap shot," Daisy spat out as she forced herself to her feet. "Why did I not think that was a possibility from you..." As soon as she glanced up to try and catch sight of Kokoro, she saw him sprinting away, likely heading for the Warp Pipe that would lead back to the mainland. Donkey Kong pounded on his chest, taking note of the Soul Stealer's appearance before the fiend escaped from sight.

"Well, I believe that about wraps things up here," said Marissa, handing the Power Vase to Tamara. "It's been quite the afternoon, wouldn't you agree?"

"Most definitely," said Tamara.

"It's been a frenzied rumble here, for sure," added King Boo.

"We best be getting on our way," Marissa said to the Kruna. "There's just a few more preparations to be made for the Harvest Moon Festival tomorrow!"

"Harvest Moon Festival?" asked Ramona.

"Oh, but, before we go, there is something that I am curious about," said Marissa, looking specifically at Daisy. "I see you're very powerful, Kruna Daisy; even for a Nova Form warrior. In fact, I've been sensing more power within you than I have in any other Nova Form warrior I've come across in my lifetime; and there have only been about maybe a couple dozen or so at the very most throughout history, if that."

"What can I say," Daisy replied, smiling and shrugging. "Nova Form's a great transformation."

"Yes, but when you transformed in front of me at Watcher's Cape..." Marissa began. She paused for muted emphasis as she finished her

statement. "...Your Nova Form was not as powerful as it is now. Your energy signatures between then and now are completely different. It's only been roughly two weeks, and already there has been such a drastic boost in a form that is not supposed to bring about such dramatic increases. Aside from the immense boosts in energy and elemental control, Nova Form is not supposed to grant much more than a modest increase in other attributes. That's from my experience and from what I've observed anyways, but it almost seems to me like you've somehow pushed the Nova Form to its very limits. And not only that, but you look so natural in your Nova Form that it's as if it has become your base state..." Her tone then turned intensely serious. "How did you do all this? How did you become so powerful? I find it hard to believe that you could cultivate and develop those improvements of yours in such a short amount of time."

"It's simple," Daisy replied. "I put coffee in my tea so I can have caffeine while I have caffeine."

"I didn't ask for sassy remarks, woman," said Marissa. "Tell me. How did you do it? What is the secret to this...'True Nova Form,' of yours?"

Daisy didn't say anything. She exchanged glances with the rest of her teammates, as if sending a subconscious message for them to not say anything either. Bowser, Athelstan, Marut, Ramona, and Andrew all kept silent. Donkey Kong, naturally not one to say much – and otherwise oblivious to everything that had happened leading up to this point – kept quiet as well.

"Don't want to talk?" Marissa playfully replied before resuming her seriousness. "Well let me ask you this; if you had more time, could you make yourself even more powerful?"

Daisy perked up in surprise. "...Huh?"

"Could you?" asked the demon witch. "If the Blood Moon were not to come for, let's say another two weeks, and you therefore had another two weeks time to 'prepare' or do whatever it is you did to get to your current state, could you stretch your Nova Form to be even more formidable than it has become now?"

"Maybe," Daisy said. "I don't know. Why? Are you concerned by how much better I've gotten? Or do you realize that maybe you're not as high and mighty as you thought?"

Marissa chuckled, calm and unfazed. "Oh, I'm just curious, that's all. Uh – one more question. Is Geno still exiling himself in shame and fear, or should I expect to see him tomorrow during your collective 'attempts' to try and stop me?"

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see!" Daisy exclaimed.

"I'd be surprised if he did," Marissa replied, chuckling some more. "I'd be even more surprised if he didn't run the moment he sees himself on the losing end of things."

"Alright, you've bad mouthed Geno quite enough already!" shouted Andrew. "By the time tomorrow passes, you won't have anything left to say to anybody! We'll make sure of that; Geno included!"

"Now that, I'd like to see," said Marissa. "I might even pay to see that, but not as much as you all will for crossing paths with me."

"Soon you will all realize how in over your heads you've been for thinking you could step to us!" yelled King Boo.

"Tomorrow will be the last time you annoy us!" exclaimed Tamara. "We'll make sure of that!" Marissa's broom rose higher, carrying her and Tamara further up into the air. King Boo followed and kept close to them.

"Enjoy your last night of peace, Kruna!" Marissa called down. "Because after tonight, you'll be sleeping with the Cheep Cheeps from now on. Oh, and make sure you have plenty of those Mushrooms on hand. We don't want to see you all dying too early. Buh-bye now!"

Donkey Kong and the Kruna watched as Marissa, Tamara, and King Boo flew through the sky in the direction of the mainland. The six elemental wielders looked on, an individualized mixture of confusion, outrage, and defeat swelling within each one of them. Their campaign in Sarasaland had been a tough one, to say the absolute

least, and they knew it. What had just transpired only added on to the string of harrowing, gut-wrenching events they had to endure, and judging by what Marissa said, the worst that was yet to come may have very well gotten worse.

"She said they'll be preparing for the Harvest Moon Festival?" murmured Ramona.

"Sarasaland's annual celebration of the harvest moon," said Daisy. "The sun and the moon both were always very important symbols of Sarasaland. Sometime in either April or May, depending on the calendar, there's the Rising Sun Festival. It's a celebration during the early morning and into the early evening where we praise the sun for the life and natural beauty that it promotes. The Harvest Moon Festival occurs in either late October or early November, usually an exact six months after the Rising Sun Festival. The Harvest Moon festival runs from the early evening through the night and into the early morning. We pay homage to the moon for the empowerment and healing that it gives us and the land."

"And tomorrow's the Harvest Moon Festival," said Bowser. "The same day that the Blood Moon is supposed to appear."

"Does that..." Andrew stuttered, wide-eyed. "Does that mean that she's going to be in Castle Town during the Blood Moon?! That puts the whole town in danger!"

"Not if we get to her beforehand!" Daisy assured. "Geno said that the Blood Moon would not occur until about nine or ten at night." Her expression darkened. "Besides, we couldn't confront her in Castle Town anyways. I doubt the townspeople would take too kindly to my presence there, and they'd probably be more of a hindrance than a help. That'd mean we'd have to be as subtle and covert as possible to not cause a stir with them if we did try to fight her there, but doing that against Marissa would slow us down. So really, if we can intercept Marissa tomorrow before she reaches Castle Town, that would be the ideal scenario."

"And we should have plenty of time to do so," said Athelstan. "So no pressure. We've got this, right?"

"Oh yeah!" Daisy shouted. "We're gonna make some noise tomorrow and knock that witch clear across Sarasa Field!"

"Moments after 'subtle and covert' came out of her mouth," Bowser mumbled.

"Well if we confront her outside of Castle Town, then I'm throwing 'subtle and covert' out the window," Daisy replied.

"You mean a metaphorical window, I hope," said Ramona.

"I don't think she does," stated Bowser.

"We'll need to be sure to talk to Warra and Neva when we get back to Geno's Sanctuary," said Andrew. "Because it's entirely likely that Marissa'll have her hellhounds nearby, not to mention King Boo and her Sweeps."

"Here's hoping they were able to find out something good," said Daisy. She asked Donkey Kong, "You coming back with us, big guy?"

"Sure!" DK replied, flexing some muscles with excitement.

"What are you even here in Sarasaland for anyways?" asked Bowser.

"Harvest Moon Festival!" DK replied. "Got here a couple days ago! But I also thought I'd take the time to go on a little banana expedition! They say the Easton Kingdom Tropical Islands have some of the heartiest bananas in the known world! Protein-packed and filling, loaded with magnesium and zinc! They're like 'Super Bananas!' Here." He slipped off his backpack and opened it up to reveal bundles of freshly-picked bananas. He then picked one and handed it to Marut. "Try one of these!"

Marut took the banana, unpeeled it, and bit into the thick flesh. A grin made its way onto his face as he murmured, "Mmm; bananas."

"Mmm; bananas," said DK.

"Super Bananas," added Andrew.

"Super Bananas," DK repeated.

"If you ask me, you're all bananas," muttered Bowser.

Daisy had to immediately cover her mouth to stifle a giggle, though her gesture caused everyone else to start laughing, including Bowser. As Daisy lead the group to the Warp Pipe she and Kokoro had used earlier, the ominous threat of Marissa and the Blood Moon lingered overhead, but they did not seem to pay it much mind. They were in good spirits, and with each others' help, they intended to keep it that way, no matter what awaited for them within the next thirty-six hours.

Chapter XXXIX

Looming Destiny :

Peach looked out the window of the kitchen in Bowser's Palace. It was a pleasant day; one of those days where she didn't have to worry about leaving her Royale kart uncovered in the front driveway. On this casual, lax day, she had opted to keep her hair in a ponytail to prevent the cool wind from blowing it all around, and she had chosen to wear her bulky heather gray, pink-lettered Mushroom City University sweater and her pink jeans for some extra warmth. Mario and Luigi had both been absent from the Mushroom Kingdom for more than a fortnight on some classified mission of high importance. The two had departed just a day later than when Bowser and the rest of the Kruna left on their mission. Daisy had been gone even longer than that. It had been nearly three weeks of quiet and peace in the Mushroom Kingdom, but it seemed like three weeks of doldrums. There wasn't even a visit from Wario or Waluigi or even Rosalina. By all accounts, the Mushroom Kingdom had not experienced much activity as of late and had remained calm and quiet.

Peach had driven to the Koopa King's palace as per his wishes to check up on the place and make sure that everything was fine with the koopas inside. Toad had actually started to work on elemental tools with Alden, a gold-shelled koopa. When Toad found out that Alden was one of the koopas that helped upgrade Bowser's Offroader and Daisy's Mach Bike before their trips to the elemental shrines, he sought him out to discuss the possibility of a collaborative project. Now, it seemed like it was on almost a daily basis that the two blacksmiths worked at either Peach's Castle or Bowser's Palace crafting new tools with productivity that neither had been able to accomplish individually in the past. That helped in keeping both militaries of the Mushroom Kingdom and the Koopa Clan well-armed for defense; something that was needed seeing as how the absence of their most prolific elemental wielders would only make them more vulnerable.

The princess was finishing up a mid-morning meal for herself, Toad, and Alden when the two blacksmiths trotted into the kitchen arguing about some sort of new development of theirs. The sweat on their foreheads and scattered bits of grime on their gear indicated that they had been toiling away at something of significance.

"Of course it malfunctioned!" Toad exclaimed. "White and light blue is ice, white and gold is light; people color-code this elemental stuff for a reason!"

"I got confused 'cause that piece was white and *silver* !" Alden snapped. "That could've been anything!"

"How did you get confused?" asked Toad. "We tested them out beforehand and left sticky-note labels on each of the ones we weren't sure of!"

Alden shrugged. "It must've fallen off! It wasn't there when I picked it up!"

"What have you guys been up to?" asked Peach.

"We've been trying to work on our designs for elemental armor," said Toad. "The elemental clothing does offer a bit of protection against the specific element they're made for, but if we can come up with some good pieces of armor, then the protective properties could be a bit more enhanced!"

"But wouldn't armor just slow people down?" Peach asked.

"It won't be much different from the Striker Armor!" Toad said. "In fact, now that I think about it, we could use that as a base mold! I had already tested out a prototype with Mario and Luigi before they left. I just need to make them lightweight and maintain their elemental charge."

"But there's gonna be some trade-off," said Alden. "The light armor won't hinder movement, but I'm pretty sure the medium and heavy sets we have planned will offer more protection and defense at the expense of mobility."

"That's pretty interesting," said Peach. "Could you guys take me

back there and show me what progress you've made?"

Toad and Alden exchanged surprised looks with each other. Rarely did Peach ever have any interest in such things as elemental tools or anything related to the subject, regardless of the circumstances.

"C'mon, take me into the armory, you guys," said Peach. "I wanna see what you all have been up to."

Toad and Alden maintained their looks of surprise as they both replied to the princess, "Sure."

The two blacksmiths lead Peach into their workshop within the armory-garage. All sorts of tools, equipment, gadgets, and materials were spread about. The room didn't look all too different from the armory in Princess Peach's Castle.

"Mind that smiley-faced death trap over there, Princess," said Toad, snickering.

"Oh yes, the Koopa Clown Car," Alden muttered. "What an archaic, dated piece of machinery. You see, we had a down period in terms of resources during its conception, so we had to...'simplify' the designs."

"Say no more, Alden," replied Toad. "We're looking to the future with all kinds of possible creations awaiting for us to make!"

The three walked up to a table loaded with several different pieces of metal. A dull, rusted shell of what appeared to be an upper chest plate in the making rested on the center of the tabletop.

"This here is the recent foul-up," said Alden. "As you can see, we had a metal piece with elemental ice properties that I tried to meld with this collection of light pieces. That ended up disrupting the energies of both elements, so this heap of material is now 'dead' with no elemental properties whatsoever."

"And this stuff's not cheap," added Toad. "It takes a special, expensive process to invigorate – or in this case, reinvigorate – pieces like these! We can't be wasting our resources like that!"

"What's this supposed to be?" Peach asked, walking towards a unique elemental tool. The Radiant Claymore sword hanging on the wall stretched almost all of Peach's height, and when she grabbed it's black and gold hilt, she found herself struggling against its leverage. "Wow, this one's got some weight to it!"

"Be careful with that, Princess!" Alden warned. "It's a bit unwieldy!"

Peach steadied the sword as sweat formed on her forehead. "Yeah, you're right! This one certainly feels so! I bet this is a pretty effective tool!"

"Yes they're all effective!" exclaimed Toad. "We made them! That's proof enough! You know our quality control!"

Peach staggered a few steps forward into an open area in the room and heaved a swing of the claymore, then regained her balance to present it as if she intended to send out an elemental blast. At that moment, she felt something strange overcome her spirit. Her mouth drifted open a little with awe, certain that she felt the blade somehow respond to her even though she couldn't explain or understand why. The tool seemed so unwieldy for her, but at the same time, she had never had a better grasp of any sword than she did right then and there. Peach couldn't help but think back to the last time she saw Ramona and the Light Broadsword Toad made for her. The image of the Kruna of Light holding her tool remained in her mind until loud, rushing footsteps from the hallway interrupted her thoughts.

"Princess!" a voice called from the doorway. Toadette rushed in, frantic in her mannerisms. "We got a call earlier from Wario! He wanted to know why he saw Bowser in Sarasaland!"

"What?" Peach, Toad, and Alden all shouted in unison.

"You're serious?" Geno asked Warra and Neva. "I had a feeling it was possible, but I just could not know for sure without getting inside Marissa's Lair to see."

The eight Kruna and Donkey Kong had gathered around their

bonfire at Geno's Sanctuary. Nighttime darkness contrasted with the moon above; the last rising of the celestial body before the day of the Blood Moon. Warra and Neva had returned before the others and waited for everyone so that they could share their findings all at once.

"Yes, that's the secret," said Neva. "The secret of Marissa's hellhounds – she's been transforming the population of Sarasaland one by one! I'm all but certain of it now. That's the only thing that makes sense at this point."

"And now, I believe I am certain of it," Geno replied. "Given the nature of the Betedaimon venom, it does make sense. The hellhounds are all victims of her metamorphosis; victims who allowed the Betedaimon venom to take over their spirit. Years of repression from their king had only made them more susceptible to easy transformation."

"But I thought they had all supported King Sarasa!" Ramona asked.

"They did," Nova Daisy said. "But what else could they do?"

"The same goes for the current populace," said Warra. "If anything, our actions here might have made them even more prone..."

"To be doomed to immortality as hellhounds," Geno finished.

"What? No!" Neva exclaimed. "I've seen hellhounds killed before! I've killed hellhounds before!"

"Immortality is a category containing subsets," said Geno. "The immortality I speak of when referring to the hellhounds is of everlasting longevity, but they are still prone to death by anything other than age. The immortality of Marissa's is imperfect as well, but far more substantial and as close to true immortality as one could get. Beating her will be nowhere near easy."

"But, how do we beat Marissa?" asked Ramona.

"Geno mentioned something about uniting elements," stated Andrew.

"Elemental Seal," said Bowser. "We just need to sufficiently weaken or subdue her so that we can combine all eight of our elemental energies and trap her in the seal."

"Bowser has it right on point," said Geno. "As far as we know, that will be the only way to win, but if you fail to do enough damage to her, if you fail to exhaust her, she will be able to resist the influence of your powers and prevent any seal from coming to be. Combine your elemental powers no sooner than necessary, but no later. I surmise just before the Blood Moon, she will be too preoccupied with drawing power from it and with trying to initiate her ritual spell to be able to focus on you all or put her full effort and power towards fending you off."

"But we have reason to believe that she'll be waiting in Castle Town before the Blood Moon," said Neva. "We can't risk waiting that long – we're intercepting her before she reaches Castle Town!"

"Yeah, we've spent enough time improving our skills and honing our craft!" Andrew asserted. "We can handle her! We're better than we were two weeks ago!"

"Maybe not by a lot, but just enough, I agree," said Ramona.

"Well..." Geno began, chuckling. "If that is what you all truly believe, then far be it from me to say otherwise. You all sound confident enough in your abilities, so I must be as well." He turned and headed for the deeper regions of the sanctuary.

"Geno, Wait!" Daisy exclaimed. "You are...coming with us tomorrow, right?"

Geno stopped walking but did not turn around. He gave no response, leaving everyone else in wonder.

"Aren't you?" asked Daisy.

Geno still did not respond, nor did he give any sort of indication of having acknowledged that the Kruna of Earth spoke aside from the pause in his movement. But within moments, the pause ended, and he continued off into the distance until he was out of even the sight

of both Daisy's and Andrew's night vision.

"Don't y'all worry about him," said Andrew. "He'll be out there tomorrow. Just you all watch!"

"Or maybe this just isn't his fight," Ramona wondered aloud.

"He has followed Marissa to Sarasaland and has been here since," said Bowser. "Is it possible that he's just now realizing that it's not his battle to win?"

"C'mon you guys, just give him some space," asserted Daisy. "Like Andrew said, he'll be out there."

"Yeah, bros and brodettes," said Marut. "We need to all chill out and relax. It's not like tomorrow's the end of the world or anything – er, well, it could be, but I'd rather not think about it on account of actually wanting to get some sleep tonight. Somebody please interrupt me before I spook myself-"

"Marut's got a point," said Athelstan. "This is some great time we have set aside to rest up before what could very well be one of – if not *the* – most important days of our lives! DK's got the idea!"

Donkey Kong had his backpack propped up against a log, creating a makeshift recliner that he had been leaning up on. He had taken out all his bananas beforehand to ensure that he didn't bruise them. He appeared to be fairly comfortable with his legs propped up on a sloped rock.

"Tomorrow is a pretty big day, isn't it?" Daisy murmured. She fazed out reality as her focus lingered around her statement. *I haven't had too many opportunities to say that,* she thought. Her mind brought her back to her time in the Mushroom Kingdom before meeting her Kruna teammates. Quick flashbacks then ran through Daisy's thoughts in succession, all scenarios of what could have classified as 'big days' but didn't.

Hey, Mario! Need some help for that next Smash tournament? Daisy had called out at the renowned fire wielder. *Let's spar! C'mon! It'll be a sneak peak for you of what to expect when I qualify!*

Actually, there's a sports fair coming to town with all sorts of competitions next weekend, Mario had replied. *It's got all your favorites; track and field, baseball, weightlifting, soccer, and so much more; you should probably check it out. I don't know if you'd very much enjoy the Smash scene...*

Yo, Luigi! Let's take down all those ghosts! Daisy had said before the air wielder went on his campaign against King Boo. *I don't get scared! I'll make them all scared of me!*

Nah, you should stay here, Luigi had said, scratching his head. *I mean, I only have one Poltergust...and I don't think I'm going into your kind of place, so...yeah.*

What's that? Mario's been kidnapped? Daisy had asked Peach in her dining room hall. *I'll go after him and get him back real quick! Put a timer on it!*

No, that's alright, Peach had said. *I'm already set to go. Besides, that would take away from your training time. I wish I had your strength and speed.*

Daisy stared at Peach as if her friend had lost a couple steps. *Then why not let me go so I can use my strength and speed for you?* she then said, pacing each word to sound as clear as possible .

No, I've got it taken care of, Peach had told her.

Hey Bros! Lemme come with ya'll and Bowser to Beanbean Kingdom! Daisy had said. *I bet I could lay down some serious damage on whoever stole Peach's voice!*

Nah, we got it taken care of, Mario had said, Luigi and Bowser nodding in unison.

Hey, you're going on a treasure hunt? Daisy had asked as Toad strapped on his equipment. *Sounds like an adventure! But...you don't need my help...do you...*

Nope! Toad had exclaimed with a smile, making his way for the door. *See ya later!*

Daisy glanced at each of her teammates. *Those guys back at the Mushroom Kingdom never let me or even wanted me to go on any of their missions or adventures,* she thought. *I should be mad at them for snubbing me so much...but, I'm not as mad as I thought I would be. They must have their reasons. I feel that it's all just the simple fact that my destiny is too different from theirs. I'm here now, and I have the chance to make an impact now, just like I did against Elkon. Being an athlete is great and all, but the ability to help the world is something I always wanted more, and it's my time now. I can't squander this with a failure!*

"Daisy!" DK called out, breaking the Kruna of Earth from her muse. "Remember that '09 Striker Championship run you and your striker team went on?"

Daisy smiled. "Boy, do I ever! Statistically, it was a pretty mediocre season, but it was my favorite for sure!"

" *Striker* Championship?" Andrew asked. "You mean like that 'battle soccer' thing on TV?"

"Oh yeah, I've seen that before!" Ramona said. "I just could not *ever* do it though. It's just too brutal for me."

"I'd second that myself, actually," Andrew remarked. "But you won a championship in it, Daisy?"

"Oh, this is a story," Bowser said, chuckling. "You two and Neva weren't around when we were at the Earth Shrine in Maralah, so you didn't get to hear it. I almost wish Waluigi was here, considering he took the defeat the hardest by far out of everyone! The look on his face – man!"

"That 2009 striker season was the year of this dark horse underdog right here!" DK said, gesturing to Daisy. "She won it all, and by a thread!"

"It happened like this," said Bowser. "Daisy's team went 8-7 heading into the final week of the regular season, scheduled on the road against conference rival Donkey Kong and his team. Their playoff status was up in the air. Waluigi had taken the number one seed at

13-3 early on in the day, and Donkey Kong had already clinched his division earlier in the season, now at 11-4. The pressure was on Daisy's team, for they had to slip in to a wild card spot. At the start of the day, she needed Luigi's and Diddy Kong's teams to both lose and also needed to win against Donkey Kong's team in order to qualify for the postseason. Now, just a half hour before the primetime kickoff, Luigi and Diddy had both lost their final games, giving Daisy the opportunity for a playoff berth as a sixth seed..."

"And she somehow managed to pull it all together for a 3-2 win in sudden death," DK continued. "So she went into the playoffs and ran the table! Mario, me again, Yoshi, and then Waluigi in the championship match!"

" *Nobody* thought she would do it," Bowser said. "She proved everyone wrong for sure. Every match went down to the wire, and just when you were sure she had lost, she came up with something at the last minute to make up for a whole game's worth of otherwise forgettable play."

"She had started the regular season off going 1-4, at that!" DK added. "The team stats overall on the season weren't very good either."

"Hey, I wasn't worried about style points or looking like the best," Daisy remarked, laughing. "I just wanted to win the games, so I went out there and won the games. Yeah, they were all for the most part pretty gritty and ugly, low-scoring and brutal – you know, the kinds of situations where you gotta grind it out – but I think that just made it all more fun and exciting! I didn't care who we were playing, or how outmatched we were – I just knew I wanted to win!"

"And that's the mindset we need to have tomorrow," said Andrew. "It's gonna be pretty gritty and ugly twenty-four hours from now, just like it's been ever since we came together as a team, but we're not letting that get in our way of a victory, right? Let's all share that same mentality Daisy had, and ride it to a win tomorrow!"

"We'll show that witch we mean business!" Neva exclaimed. "Then, we can focus on and deal with King Sarasa."

"Oh boy, more of the gritty and ugly, huh," Ramona mumbled, anxious. "Well if that's what it's gotta take, then that's what we'll have to do."

"Whatever it takes to get a win, Ramona," said Warra. "Within reason, of course."

"We made it this far, so we gotta finish!" Athelstan exclaimed. "We'll be ready for Marissa! Does anyone here doubt that?"

"Not in the least," said Bowser.

"No way!" Marut cheered. "We're gonna take the unreachable! Push the unmovable-"

"Oh, that reminded me!" said Athelstan. "Did I ever tell you guys about the herd of Reznors that tried stampeding through the Kallantown Archives?"

"Pfft; please, bro!" said Marut. "I bet it ain't nearly as bad as the time in Nimbus Land when we had that fleet of Albatosses that kidnapped some of our people...and all our bombs for some reason, too!"

"Or the time last week," said Bowser. "You know, when Marut thought it would be a good idea to just take Sarasaland and literally push it all somewhere else while no one was looking?"

Neva slowly clapped her hands. "Nice, air-head."

"No, you guys gotta hear this," said Athelstan. "It was insane! They had stormed into the building, all throughout the halls and everything! It was as if either the Kallantown Guard was sleeping and didn't defend against them, or someone had let them free from the zoo!"

As Athelstan told his story, Daisy couldn't help but smile. Everyone was in good spirits, more than confident and ready for the battle to come. *There's no way we're losing this,* she thought. *Just no way! Marissa and company might have had a run for quite a while, but it ends tomorrow! I hope you're ready, Marissa, and you too, Dad – you're both going to see why we're Kruna!*

It was past midnight when all of the Kruna, except for Andrew, had fallen asleep. Geno had not made a reappearance in the few hours since he had left. The Kruna had drifted off into slumber one after another. Andrew was about ready to do the same, but felt compelled to stare at Daisy for a moment.

Look at her, Andrew thought. *Nova Form even when she's asleep. She hasn't come out of that form since the day Culex cured her of her Betedaimon body – or, I guess I should say, 'incomplete hellhound body' now that we know what the Betedaimon venom was for.*

Daisy was blissfully deep in slumber, sprawled out in the most haphazard, sloppy manner. She seemed so peaceful and serene. A silver-furred rabbit skipped and hopped over from out deeper in the sanctuary, coming to a stop just inches away from Daisy before curling itself up and falling asleep too.

I wonder what it's like to be in the Nova Form, Andrew thought. *It's certainly a potent power-up, but at the same time, it doesn't seem overpowered... Or maybe that's because we've only ever seen Daisy use it without actual "mastery" like Geno was talking about. We didn't get to see what she did today against Kokoro and the rest of those fiends. Maybe we'll wake up tomorrow, and her mastery over the Nova Form will actually make her even more formidable! Even so, it still just doesn't seem like the Nova Form would do something like double someone's strength or speed or whatever. It almost feels like it's something that was originally meant to serve a* utilitarian *purpose rather than one in combat...*

"Andrew!" Ramona whispered. Her voice alarmed the Kruna of Shadow.

"What?" Andrew replied. His voice awoke the rabbit, but the animal didn't move.

"I can't sleep!" said Ramona, rolling over to face him.

"Did you try closing your eyes?" asked Andrew.

"Whoa," Ramona murmured. "Do you see that rabbit? Aw, that's so cute!"

"It's a rabbit, Ramona," Andrew said. "We've seen plenty of them befo-"

"C'mere, you!" Ramona whispered at the rabbit. She made kissing noises as she tried urging the animal closer, but the rabbit paid no attention. It just cocked its head to the side and gave her a strange look. Andrew flopped over on his back, laughing.

King Sarasa sat alone in his study, two fingers from his left hand pressing against his forehead. The only lights in the personal library came from the lunar light through the window and the dim desk lamp where he leaned on the table with his elbows in unrest. His throbbing head once again prevented him from getting any measurable sleep, and his medications from the secret lab had fired his metabolism into overdrive. His body was doing everything within its power to repair, replenish, rebuild, and regenerate to stave off the aging process. Aside from some minor disturbances earlier in the day, his people remained relatively tame and loyal. As far as he was concerned, everything in the grand vision he had was coming along according to plan – even with the handful of hiccups he had to endure so far.

And yet, King Sarasa was still disturbed. In fact, he seemed more disturbed than ever that night. He thought he would be ecstatic considering that in less than twenty hours, the Harvest Moon Festival would be well underway. The citywide event would raise the nation's morale and serve as the platform for Bellbridge's grand opening, therein ushering a new age with the first of many new Sarasaland monuments to come. The political, social, and economic implications of such a project could not be understated.

Though, instead of focusing on any of that, he sat there at his desk staring at a picture he kept standing near the lamp. The image showed a teenage Daisy in a lightweight orange and silver ornamental dress covered from the knee down in silver floral patterns. She had on her head a black visor with the name "Sarasa"

running over the front in bold, orange letters. In the background were the track and baseball field of Sarasaland State University; the university she would have gone to had she stayed in Sarasaland.

With a sigh, he looked down at the diamond ring he had been rolling around in his right hand. As the ring moved around in his palm, it sometimes tapped an identical ring surrounding his fourth digit.

Well into the early morning, all the Kruna were now deep in sleep. Though much of Daisy's rest had been smooth and tranquil, the past few moments of her slumber had become turbulent and disturbed to the point where she had unknowingly forced herself awake. She sat up and looked around at the area, then peered down and noticed a rabbit asleep next to her. Somewhat disturbed, she laid herself back down to resume her sleep.

The moment she dozed off, a vision formed in her mind equal in clarity to reality. She saw a titanic version of Marissa Arkana hovering over the entirety of Sarasaland and casting some sort of red cloud over the sky that spread all along the atmosphere. The Kruna of Earth's body materialized in the vision somewhere in Sarasa Field, though she found no one else there.

But you have the guts and the determination to pull through anything, Master Terran's voice echoed. *Don't worry one bit, because one day, your parents will be able to see you for who you really are!*

Nova Daisy then saw what appeared to be a young, kid version of her dad further up the field picking up a gem that looked eerily familiar to the Master Pendant. The pendant glowed and siphoned its energy through to him, then retracted and flew from his hands. It zoomed right in front of Daisy and latched itself onto her neck, at which point she felt a demonic presence trying to call out to her soul.

She then saw the Sarasaland Campanile Clock Tower rise into the air, free of its foundation and expanding by the minute. The colossal version of Marissa grabbed the free-floating building and zapped a bolt of magical power into the tower's clock. Daisy stared at the

vortex overhead that resulted, but her attention shot back to the kid version of King Sarasa, who had started crying and screaming as what appeared to be a twenty-four foot tall titan of stone built itself up in front of him. The stone giant raised a leg high and then stomped it down on top of him, crushing him several feet into the ground. Daisy had to slip to the side as the titan ran towards and past her, heading for a massive, six-story tower situated directly south of Castle Town, in the deep southern end of Sarasaland.

Help, a voice reverberated through the air. *Help...*

Daisy snapped up out of her dream, now more alert than her first impromptu waking. The same silver-furred rabbit from earlier sat up, staring at her. It nudged itself into Daisy's side to grab her attention, then turned and took off for the tunnel leading out into Sarasa Field.

Daisy frowned, focused on her dream and not paying the rabbit any mind. *Now what the hell was that all about?* she wondered. *And that voice that called out for help... That was the same voice I heard a couple weeks ago right before I ran into Kokoro out in Sarasa Field...*

Chapter XL

Final Day :

The sun beamed down on Daisy as she knelt near the sand pit behind Geno's House and dug a small hole in the ground with her hands. When she felt she had a good enough depth dug out, she took the healthy sapling beside her and planted its roots into the hole. Neva came walking up as the Nova Form earth wielder tinkered with the sapling's roots and made sure the little tree stayed stable.

"What are you doing, Sarasa?" Neva asked. "We gotta go! The others are waiting by the tunnel exit, and you're here on your knees gardening?"

"There's not a lot of trees here in the sanctuary," said Daisy. "But, judging by the way this place looks, this valley, used to be more than just some grassland rift between the mountains. Marut told me earlier about the Easton Kingdom Whitewood and the lively mystique it had... I feel that this place here used to be like that area; at least, somewhat similar. Like, rich and teeming with all kinds of flowering trees and plantlife far more expansive than what's here now. Don't get me wrong; this place is still pretty surreal...but, it almost looks lonely here...and, not necessarily dead, but, not really alive either..."

"...Sorta like how Sarasaland as a whole is now, huh?" replied Neva.

"Sorta like how our world is now," said Daisy. "But we can change that. And I feel that today can be the start of a big turning point."

"So you planted a tree," Neva said, propping her elbow up on Daisy's head.

Daisy rolled her eyes, but smiled anyways. "This lil' tree is gonna grow to be big and strong, and it'll sprout lotus and hibiscus flowers all over its branches, and its leaves will be the thickest, most liveliest green Sarasaland has seen in years, and it'll have the darkest,

richest, heartiest bark. Just watch. All it needs is some time."

"...How much time?"

Daisy stared at the sapling for a few moments before she gave her sincere and hopeful response. "As much time as it'll take."

The two were then silent for a little while. Daisy stood up and shook off the soil on her hands. She had planted many things before, but in her eyes, that sapling was the most important thing she had ever planted and ever will plant.

"...We're gonna do something about this whole mess, right?" asked Neva.

"We sure are," Daisy said, wrapping her arm around Neva's shoulder. The leaves on the sapling lazily flapped around in the breeze. Though the little tree only reached just above Daisy's knees in height, the Kruna of Earth could sense the strong life force it possessed within.

The eight Kruna emerged from the tunnel to Geno's Sanctuary. It was some time after noon when they stepped out onto Sarasa Field, but they had yet to see Geno at all for the day. His absence had been disconcerting, but they nonetheless did not let it interfere with their preparations. They were set on confronting Marissa before the Blood Moon's rising, but as a precautionary measure, Donkey Kong had left earlier in the morning to make his way into Castle Town in an attempt to try and alert people of the impending threat.

All eight of the Kruna stood at full health and full power, and Neva and Warra both had Super Mushrooms and Ultra Mushrooms in their pouches should they be needed. Daisy's Nova Form looked ethereal, her expression calm and serene yet fierce and intense at the same time. The day they had been preparing for had finally come. The, quaint, partly cloudy sky did nothing to foreshadow the impending conflict.

"Again, everyone; we're going straight for her mansion," said

Bowser. "And that's-"

"To the north of here," said Neva. "In The Deep Wood, just inside the Chai Kingdom boundaries."

"Let's get a move on then," said Warra, already heading north on the path. The others followed behind him, but Daisy felt compelled to stand her ground. Something in the atmosphere seemed odd and bizarre.

Then Daisy heard it again. *Help...*

Where'd that voice come from? Daisy thought. *It's the same one as last night!* Her eyes darted around Sarasa Field as her teammates stopped to look at her. *Is this my Nova Form acting screwy? Is this what happens when you don't power-down for half a month?*

"What's the hold-up, clay-crafter?" Neva shouted. "Don't tell me you're getting cold feet now!"

Daisy ignored her. She could feel her inner third eye activating even though she was certain that Marissa was neither anywhere in the vicinity nor had any influence nearby with her Malocchio Eye in any manner.

"Something's wrong," Daisy murmured as the team trotted back to her.

Help...

"What's wrong?" Warra asked. "Is Marissa doing something?"

"No, this isn't Marissa," said Daisy. She gasped when she saw the silver-furred rabbit from last night on one of the westward trails.

Need help...

The rabbit turned and dashed down the trail. Daisy took off to chase after the furry animal, leaving her teammates in utter confusion.

"Where are you going?!" yelled Bowser.

"I need to check this out!" Daisy shouted back. The rest of the Kruna darted after her as she pursued the fleeing rabbit. They ran through much of the southeastern quadrant of Sarasa Field, the rabbit sticking to the paths and not diverging off-track into the grass or brush. For as fast as Daisy was, it seemed that whenever she picked up speed, the rabbit sped up as well. She came to a stop to let the rest of her team catch up, and the rabbit stopped as well. The moment they started moving again, the rabbit moved too.

"It's leading us somewhere," said Daisy. She picked up the pace but was not in as much of a hurry as before.

"Do we have time for this?" asked Ramona.

"No, we don't," said Andrew. "But that's not stopping Daisy."

"We need to get back to our main task!" Bowser asserted. "Not this side quest of chasing rabbits, Daisy!"

"No!" the Kruna of Earth shouted. "We have to follow it! The rabbit's leading us somewhere important! I just know it!"

Soon, the Kruna came to a four-way intersection. The rabbit turned left to continue on the path in that direction. On the right path, the southern entrance to Castle Town was clearly discernible about a mile up.

"The rabbit's going straight south now," said Neva. "But for what? There's nothing of significance down in that direction. It's just gonna eventually lead us out to the sea."

Athelstan raised a hand to point up to the sky. "Then what's that up there?"

The Kruna all looked up through and above the trees to catch sight of a massive, leaning tower in the distance. It looked to reach about eight tall stories high and appeared to be made of a combination of stone and metal. The rabbit was well on its way down the straight, southbound path that led directly to the building.

"That tower wasn't there before..." said Neva, wide-eyed.

"What do you mean?" asked Marut. "You've been here longer than any of us and haven't noticed it there?"

"Exactly," stated Neva. "I say again – that tower wasn't there before."

"When was the last time you ran through this area?" asked Warra.

"Four days ago," said Neva. "It wasn't there then."

Without saying anything, Daisy left the group and sprinted down the path in the direction of the Stone Tower. Bowser stared at her with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

"Hey! Are you forgetting something?" Bowser shouted. "What about Marissa?!"

"I guess she'll have to wait," said Andrew, taking off to follow Daisy. Marut dashed with him as well.

"This isn't part of the plan, you lot of impulsive dunderheads!" Neva screamed. Daisy, Andrew, and Marut kept running regardless, making the Kruna of Ice wonder if they heard her or just ignored her.

"We'll just have to make this quick then," said Warra. He, Athelstan, and Ramona then ran after their earth, shadow, and air teammates.

Neva shook her head and then looked at Bowser. "How do you put up with them?"

Bowser shrugged. "I guess I just got used to it."

After a couple moments, Bowser and Neva both followed their team to the Stone Tower. The two hoped that their team wasn't dragging them into an unnecessary detour.

The doors to the Stone Tower were massive but proved to be no unbreachable barrier when Daisy put a fist through them. Andrew and Marut dashed ahead of her and entered the building first, surprised by the interior architecture. The inside resembled some

sort of colossal medieval palace with plenty of ladders, stairs, and platforms in abundance and likely taking up most of the room on each successive level of the building. Plenty of Goombas and Dry Bones littered the room, among other enemies and mooks, but their presence inside made little sense to either of the three Kruna.

The rest of the Kruna then came rushing into the tower, at which point the doors that Daisy had burst open moments ago then slammed shut. Ramona turned around and checked them, only to find that they had been mysteriously locked without any discernible source of influence. It was then that the tower began to tremor as an otherworldly, phantom-like sound reverberated throughout the tall, spacious room.

A large embodiment of rock assembled on the center floor, coming up to the combined height and width of Bowser and Athelstan put together. Despite its hulking form, the Stone Titan leapt up into the air with ease, getting halfway up to the ceiling before crashing down onto the floor and eliciting a massive shockwave that threatened to knock the Kruna over. Warra and Athelstan both noticed a key-like artifact strapped to the Stone Titan's neck as the colossus let out a shrieking roar.

"That thing is old," Daisy suddenly said.

"Are you sure?" asked Bowser.

"It is," Athelstan said in confirmation. "Those rocks look aged to me. They're weathered and worn, but they're being secured together by some sort of special force."

"I can't tell," muttered Andrew. "It just looks like a big rock monster to me." The Stone Titan then started moving about haphazardly throughout the room. It resembled a down-scaled, rocky version of The Crestfallen from the Earth Shrine.

"Yeah, to you," said Athelstan. "I'm the stone wielder here. I know what I'm talking about when I say that 'monster' is centuries old. Hopefully you noticed by now that there's what appears to be a key around its neck."

"Likely the key out of here," said Bowser. "It's probably our only way out."

Neva clapped her hands. "Great job, Daisy! Way to follow that rabbit! We barrel rolled our way into a trap!"

"This isn't a trap," said Daisy, calm and sure. She added nothing. The Stone Titan started backing away from the Kruna, interestingly not engaging in combat in spite of its hostile first impression.

"I swear, you were already weird before," said Neva. "But this Nova Form mastery and 'third eye' thing that Geno taught you has made you even more screwy!"

"Thanks for the compliment," Daisy replied. "I love being weird."

"Is that thing running away?" Marut asked. Sure enough, the Stone Titan was climbing ladders and jumping on platforms in an attempt to get up to the second level and flee from the Kruna.

"We've gotta chase after it," Daisy ordered, already darting for the nearest platform.

The Stone Titan moved fast, getting close to reaching the second floor in just a handful of moments after the Kruna started chasing it. Their route up looked to be a convoluted mess that mostly stuck to the circular perimeter of the tower, but that occasionally did cross through the center the higher up they rose. Several enemies and creatures got in the Kruna's way as they tried to keep pace with the rocky giant, though their presence did not seem to be too much of a hindrance for the elemental wielders.

The Kruna reached the second floor in time to see the Stone Titan already halfway up to the third floor. Another, more varied set of platforms, ladders, and stairs were set up as a path that led into the next level. Again, the elemental wielders found themselves chasing the rock colossus in what was quickly proving to be an extreme platforming exercise. The trend would continue with each successive level they reached, one wrong move guaranteeing a fall all the way back to the base of the respective floor. The mooks became more numerous, and the route up more complex with each

floor.

The moment all the Kruna stepped foot on the fifth floor, the tower tremored again. The Stone Titan did not appear to have done anything that caused the convulsion and kept rising up through the tower without a break in its pace. Neva peered down through the opening in the flooring that they had passed through from the fourth floor, catching sight of a neon green and brown barrier of magical power ascending up. If they didn't reach the next floor quick enough, that barrier would likely rise up and crush them against one of the ceilings.

"We gotta move now!" Neva screamed. "There's a magical wall that's following us from underneath!"

The Stone Titan stopped its ascent just long enough to turn around and hurl a couple boulders down that it grew from its arms. The falling rocks forced the Kruna into spread evasive maneuvers.

"Get crushed by the moving wall from below or the rocks from above," said Bowser. "Gee, this place is the greatest! And I'm not just being sarcastic!" He conjured a fireball as he and the others started up the broken, obstacle-laden path to the sixth floor. When he pulled back to throw his projectile in midair, the Stone Titan made an acrobatic aerial somersault to spray rocks down from above. Once more, the attacks forced the Kruna to dodge as they made sure not to fall from their height and lose ground on the still advancing figure.

The magical barrier phased through the bottom of the fifth floor and caught the incoming boulders. Upon touching the magic wall's selectively-permeable surface, the boulders shattered to pieces. Before any of the Kruna could get off an attack, the Stone Titan had already made its way up to the sixth floor and was protected by the fifth floor ceiling. The elemental wielders sped up their pursuit as the magical barrier continued its ominous ascent.

"I am getting so tired of all this jumping," said Marut, panting.

" *You're* getting tired?" Athelstan asked. "You're the air wielder here!"

"I know!" Marut replied. "I don't know how Mario and Luigi can do it all day!"

Upon reaching the sixth floor, the Kruna expected another, even more difficult platforming challenge in wait. However, that was not the case. All they saw was what appeared to actually be a recovery room of sorts with special herbs and, even Mushrooms. There was a single, massive, open doorway straight ahead on the other side of the room, leading out of the tower. The magical barrier that had been following them rushed up once all eight of them had made it to the sixth level and locked itself in place right underneath the drop down doorway.

"At least that barrier's not following us anymore," said Warra.

"Yeah, but now we can't go back down," said Ramona.

"Not like I would've let you guys go back down anyways," said Daisy.

"Can we put a checkpoint here?" Athelstan asked. "That was a brutal five floors!"

"If we could checkpoint real life, then yes," said Bowser. "Otherwise, let's go for that opening to the outside. That's the only place that rock giant could have gone."

Dashing across the room, the Kruna bolted out the entryway and onto a platform stuck to the outside of the tower. Now, it appeared as if the Kruna would have to scale the stairs, platforms, and jumps along the tower perimeter, a nasty drop down below being the penalty should any one of them make a bad move. The Stone Titan had just escaped from their sight around the tower's walls, prompting them to begin their ascent in pursuit again.

The amount of moving and floating platforms both made things easier and harder at the same time, depending on the certain sections and the relations between the platforms and other chunks of land. Though, the goldening of the sky made the Kruna much more cognizant of how much time they were burning off with their chase in the Stone Tower.

"Let's hope we can close this out quick!" shouted Bowser. "It's got to be past three already at the very least!"

The Stone Titan had been moving noticeably slower on this outside portion. As the Kruna caught up to it, it appeared to panic a bit as it glanced back and saw them. The giant then got down on all fours, fleeing like some sort of beast and dropping large rocks along the way. The mass amount of debris that fell forced the Kruna to slow down to ensure they dodged, blocked, and countered for protection, but in effect let the Stone Titan regain some of the ground it had lost.

Again, after another small set of platforms, the Kruna got close to the Stone Titan, and again, the rocky giant released boulders from its body to slow the elemental wielders down. It then made a sharp turn right into another massive doorway. When the Kruna reached the same doorway, they saw the Stone Titan bolt straight through the room through the tower and out the entrance on the other side.

"Seventh floor?" asked Andrew.

"Seventh floor," said Bowser. "But look up."

The Kruna all peered up to catch sight of another array of platforms and similar constructs, but they were too high up for any of them to reach. Another large passageway up at the lowest of the platforms told them all they needed to know.

"We're going to start outside, but then we're going to finish this floor inside," said Daisy.

"Well, this better be it," said Neva. "There's only eight floors to this place. After this one, that giant will have nowhere else to run."

The Kruna bolted to the other side of the seventh floor to get to the ascending platforms on the outside of the tower and progressed through a platforming challenge similar to the one on the sixth floor. The outside nature of these two levels did not prevent any of the assorted mooks from hanging around and getting in the way. Regardless, the Kruna rose along the side of the tower, taking extra care not to fall on some stupid, easily makeable mistake. Just about halfway up the seventh level, the Kruna made it to the doorway

leading back inside.

The elemental wielders stepped in to see the Stone Titan raining down boulders from above and the magical barrier from earlier rising once more. They wasted no time ascending upon the remaining platforms and obstacles to make their way to the entrance to the eighth floor, the Stone Titan continuing to drop its rocks down all the while until it passed through to the level above. The magic wall below kept rising, but was far enough away to not be an issue once the Kruna all made it to the final platform.

Rocks rained down from overhead as the eight fighters jumped up through the passage in the ceiling to enter and step foot on the eighth and final level. The Stone Titan hovered across from them, strangely defying gravity in the flat, window-abundant room as it concentrated its storm of rock. Athelstan, Neva, and Marut stayed back on defense to deflect the boulders raining down from the ceiling as Warra pulled all the moisture from the room into an Aquavado. The Vado blast burst from his hands, just as all elemental Vado blasts must, and rocketed across the room to tally the first hit on the Stone Titan. The pressurized water cannon made a critical hit as it pummeled the rocky figure made entirely of the technique's antagonist element. Daisy followed up with a beastly Smash Punch on a weak spot the Aquavado succeeded in exposing, making for two very brutal hits right out the gate.

Despite the two critical hits, the Stone Titan stood strong, its endurance and health likely considerably high. The overhead rainstorm of boulders stopped, at which point the rocks that had already fallen gravitated towards the Stone Titan to fortify its body. As that happened, the rocky giant rotated its torso around in dozens of quick revolutions before slamming its arms down onto the ground. The maneuver shook the tower and knocked the eight Kruna up into the air and off their feet.

While the elemental wielders were stunned, boulders flew from the Stone Titan's body and created a massive, cylindrical funnel along the outside edges of the entire room. The whirlwind of rock continued spinning around the Kruna as Daisy, Bowser, and Ramona prepared themselves for attack. Before any of them could execute their offense, the Stone Titan swiped down one of its arms.

Parts of the whirlwind rock wall shot to opposite ends of the rooms, battering Andrew, Athelstan, Neva, and Daisy in the process. Again, the Stone Titan threw down another arm to send more rocks flying through the arena that succeeded in striking Bowser and Warra.

As the rocks kept rotating in a cyclone around them, the Stone Titan hovered towards Marut and Ramona with great haste and rammed the both of them over. The giant smacked them not only clear across the room but into the barrier of rocks that pounded them the moment they got in their track of movement. The two Kruna of Air and Light flopped back towards the center of the room, having taken horrendous damage.

"Why is being a Kruna so hard?" Ramona yelled, crying.

"I am so tired, and I am hurting so much!" Marut grunted.

The Stone Titan continued hovering around the arena, resembling an oversized puppet on strings sweeping through the room. When it finally touched its feet on the ground, it did so only to slam a punch down that jolted the whole floor and launched all the Kruna airborne. Into the air the Stone Titan went again, locking its sight on Daisy and looking to meet her at the apex of her flight.

Her voice sounding like grating metal, Daisy screamed in fury, "COUNTER!"

With a backflip and a half in the air, she brought her fists together and her arms back to nearly perpendicular with the ground as the Stone Titan flew at her. Then, like a spring that had wound up far too tight, she reversed and whipped her body forwards, bringing her arms up, over, and down to bash the rocky giant's body like a sledgehammer in a two-handed smash. The momentum at which the Stone Titan plummeted created wispy puffs of air around its body, making it already set to crash into the floor well before any of the Kruna would fall out of the air. But the rocky giant would not land on the ground, for Athelstan swung his Avalanche Spear to curve some of the revolving rockwall down and around in a diagonal arc and bash the titan back up into the air where one of the best team maneuvers from the Kruna to date would occur.

Marut created a potent updraft to blow the Stone Titan up further into the air, and consequently, straight at Andrew. The Kruna of Shadow laid down a nasty axe kick that sent the rocky giant hurtling back into Marut's updraft when, from the far side, Ramona fired a hearty light beam from her broadsword that demolished a large chunk of the titan's body. The Kruna of Light's attack launched the Stone Titan at Warra, who brought a large, scything swath of water up from below to slash the giant even higher up into the air where Bowser had already put out and angled a Tavado blast to meet it. From her crossbow's bayonet, Neva fired off a wave of magnetized frost as the Stone Titan dropped out of the air, effectively serving as the finishing move. The magnetic forces mangled and scrambled the stone body and some of its hidden metallic components; components that none of the Kruna were aware of until Neva's attack reacted with the Stone Titan the way it did.

The Stone Titan crashed onto the ground, and the rock cyclone around the arena slowed to a stop all around the room's perimeter. One by one, the Kruna touched back down on the floor. Bowser, Daisy, Warra, and Andrew all stared at the felled giant with skepticism. Its body looked to have dismantled into just another pile of rocks, only a slight semblance of its former glory visible.

"Clowns can't juggle like we just did!" Marut hollered, slapping fives with Athelstan, Neva, and Ramona.

"Hold on," said Bowser.

"Premature celebration," murmured Andrew. Daisy glanced at the shadow wielder and nodded, then shifted her gaze back at the main rock pile.

"What do ya mean 'premature celebration,' bro?" asked Marut. "Don't you guys see that pile there?"

From the Stone Titan's remains shot a brown Shy Guy with a gunmetal mask and yellow-accented gunmetal armor up into the air. The being made several aerial somersaults as he maneuvered himself to a soft landing. A crack in his mask ran from the top down into the right eye hole, but did not appear to compromise its integrity. He pulled from his back holster a bladed pickax-jackhammer hybrid

attached to a staff-like rod accounting for half the tool's length that he held with two hands. There he stood, just under five feet in height, his tool, the Povado Thumper, measuring equal in length from end to end. With what appeared to be some sort of hexagonal glass shield strapped diagonally across his back and an Alkemei Pendant of Power adorned and glowing around his neck, he crouched and hunched to one side as he shifted his Povado Thumper to offset his lean, ready to attack.

Chapter XLI

Mystic Mirror Edge Strike! :

"A Shy Guy was controlling the Stone Titan this whole time," said Bowser.

The brown-clothed Shy Guy standing across from the Kruna had gave them a great deal of trouble in his Stone Titan body, though it seemed as if losing that form had no detrimental effects on his power. If anything, the Shy Guy looked even more formidable than he did encased in the massive rocks. The Stone Titan form may have even served to provide some suppression of his energy signature.

The Alkemei around the Shy Guy's neck had not stopped glowing since he had emerged from the Stone Titan. Strangely enough, the ring of rocks surrounding the arena dissipated once the Alkemei around the Shy Guy's neck made a brief uptick in the brightness of its glow. Warra noticed it when it happened and wondered if there was a link between the Alkemei and the rocks.

The Shy Guy raised his Povado Thumper up into the air and channeled mystic energy through its shaft, coinciding with another flash from his Pendant of Power. The hexagonal piece of glass known as the Mirror Shield shifted and unbuckled itself from his back, then levitated up just above his raised tool. As the Shy Guy's energy output increased, the glass plate rotated and fell down on top of him, though instead of getting smashed, he disappeared. Once the glass hit the ground flat, the Shy Guy was nowhere to be seen, but the Kruna could still sense him.

Then the Mirror Shield lifted itself up to face the Kruna and reveal that the Shy Guy had somehow fused himself into the shield's glass. He got into an offensive stance as the Mirror Shield hovered into the air and towards the Kruna. The Alkemei around his neck made a brilliant flash that lasted but a moment, though it kept its constant, consistent glow afterwards as a sign of some sort of sustained

influence.

The Mirror Shield containing the Shy Guy then flashed and split into two identical copies, then those two copies split into four, and then those four into eight. The Shy Guy remained visible in all eight Mirror Shields, yet it looked like only one of the Shy Guys was actually animated while the others just appeared to be frozen images.

"Alright, this Shy Guy's definitely no joke," mumbled Marut.

"I'd say he is," Bowser asserted. "Look closely at those mirrors, and you'll see that it looks like there's seven fakes to one real one!"

"It's hard to tell, but you're right," said Warra. "Whatever tactic this guy just pulled out, it's not going to work."

The eight Mirror Shields then shook and flew together like a streak of lightning, one mirror lined up perfectly in front of the other. The mirrors then flew away with equal speed in random directions and stopped in various positions all around the Kruna. Then the mirrors started shuffling around through the air with each other, each one coming to a stop in a different position. They kept moving around faster and faster, making the Kruna lose track of where the real Shy Guy was in relation to the fakes.

"Okay, well, that sucks," Warra muttered.

While the rest of the Kruna looked utterly flustered and confused, Daisy kept calm and focused. Even with the mirrors now only stopping for just a quarter of a second, she did not allow her eyes to lose track of the real Shy Guy. It was as if the mastery over the Nova Form and her third eye worked to heighten her sensory acuity and intuition beyond the high level it was already at before.

The Mirror Shields all came to a sudden stop, at which time they all started flashing. Daisy whipped around to the mirror that slipped behind Andrew in time to catch sight of the Shy Guy flipping out of the glass. "Andrew! Move it!" the Kruna of Earth yelled.

The Shy Guy moved too fast and laid down a brutal hit with his long-handled implement on the shadow wielder before retreating back

into the mirror. Andrew skidded several yards along the ground as the Mirror Shields started moving and shuffling around again. The other mirrors had not put out any sort of attack.

When the Mirror Shields stopped again, Daisy turned to the glass that had stopped overhead of Bowser. "Hey! Bowser! Up top!"

The Povado Thumper came sweeping out of the Mirror Shield and clubbed Bowser on the back of his skull, nearly knocking him unconscious. The Kruna of Fire stumbled about in a stunned daze trying to regain his bearings as the mirrors all went into motion again.

"This is too confusing!" Marut hollered.

"Which one's the real one?" Athelstan asked. "I keep trying to find the real one, but they're moving too fast for me to be able to tell!"

"Look out! Neva!" Bowser yelled.

Neva twisted on her foot and sidestepped to just narrowly escape a massive sweep from the Mirror Shield that stopped just offset to her back. Out of her spin, she tried to fire off an ice arrow, only for the Shy Guy to zip back into the Mirror Shield and for the ice arrow to not only bounce off the piece of glass but get reflected right back at Neva. The Kruna of ice hit the ground hard when the arrow stuck her in her firing shoulder.

"I can't even copy his ability," Neva grumbled, clutching her dull Alkemei Hien. "My pendant can't read whatever technique this is!"

"How do we do this?" Ramona asked as the mirrors switched and shuffled again. "They keep switching and moving around before we even get a chance to attack!"

"I think we each need to lock on to a mirror and follow that specific one!" Andrew shouted.

"No! Don't lock onto a mirror!" Daisy barked. "Everyone, just spread out and cover whatever mirror gets in your area! Like zone coverage in soccer or football – you ready yourself and attack whatever gets near you!"

"And that means whoever gets the real Shy Guy will be able to counter and attack back!" Warra added. "If a mirror's out of your zone, don't worry about it and trust that someone else is covering it!"

"And make sure you attack quick!" Marut yelled, sheathing his Cyclone Ninjato to pull out his Gust Boomerangs.

The Kruna did just that. They each spread themselves out further apart and kept tabs on only the immediate area around them. Once the mirrors stopped their cycle again, the elemental wielders each had one of the glass plates nearby, though because each one was now accounted for, the real Mirror Shield and Shy Guy became evident. The moment the Shy Guy leapt out at Marut, he had his boomerangs on hand and ready to lay down a series of ultra-quick strikes on the stone wielder-spellcaster. The Shy Guy took several hits all across his body before leaping back into the mirror.

"Yeah, yeah!" Ramona cheered.

Athelstan activated his Alkemei Odina as the eight Mirror Shields all converged on each other again to form the same horizontal stack from earlier in an attempt to confuse and disgruntle the Kruna. When the Mirrors split and separated, one shot out to each of the eight Kruna to attack right away. This time, the real Shy Guy reached out and swung his Povado Thumper at Bowser. The koopa made a timely dodge and swept around to latch onto the Shy Guy's neck and pin him to the ground.

"Athelstan!" Bowser called out. "Field goal!"

"Gotcha!" Athelstan replied, charging forward. With the Pendant of Strength amplifying his might, he dished out a brutal kick that smashed his Boot Club Additions into the Shy Guy's torso with exceptional force. The Shy Guy should've shot back into the Mirror Shield he had emerged from, but he instead bounced off of it and flopped up high into the sky.

"I got him!" Andrew shouted, leaping up. He wound up to do an aerial overhead punch that would have sent the Shy Guy sailing straight down had the stone wielder-spellcaster not flipped out of his hitstun and countered with a sweep of his tool. Instead, the Kruna of

Shadow shot down to a harsh crash on the eighth level floor while the Shy Guy made a soft and controlled landing.

"He looks pretty well, considering he just took that shot from you, Athelstan," said Warra.

"This Shy Guy's puttin' us all to shame right about now, huh?" said Athelstan.

The pendant on the Shy Guy's neck stopped glowing, coinciding with a sudden reaction in which seven of the Mirror Shields broke apart and dropped to the ground. The pieces shattered, and then those pieces shattered, and so on, so forth, until the mirrors were all gone. The Shy Guy stomped a foot down, and the lone remaining Mirror Shield gravitated toward him to latch on to the upper portion of the arm opposite the weaponized, bladed end of his Povado Thumper. He then raised his tool up into the air and pulled it back as he leaned forward, a fierce glow overtaking the body of his implement as he got ready to unleash a swing.

Daisy hunched forward, looking like a tiger on two legs. Andrew forced himself up as the rest of the Kruna all got into position to make either a defensive or evasive move. The Shy Guy held his Povado Thumper back and up for a few moments, energy ready to erupt from its pickax-jackhammer blade.

Except the Shy Guy didn't swipe with his weapon. Daisy had swayed her stance, already well into charging her Seismic Wave and growing its power by the second. The Shy Guy made a slight adjustment and waited on the Kruna of Earth's attack as if he were intrigued by its execution.

Daisy slammed her hands forward and together to fire off her gathered seismic energy. The Seismic Wave rumbled towards the Shy Guy and shook the air just as the Kruna had gotten used to seeing it do, though the Shy Guy tilted his head and gave it an odd look. With a swing of his Povado Thumper, the stone wielder-spellcaster smacked the Seismic Wave and sent its path skyward and into the ceiling. He paid no mind to the debris the impact brought down behind him.

Daisy grimaced as the Shy Guy got into the same position he was in before her attack. *For as much as I've progressed, this guy still batted away one of my staple moves like it was just another blast he'd seen before!* she thought.

The Kruna all kept themselves ready, expecting the Shy Guy to intensify the energy around his tool and attack at any second. A few moments passed, but the Shy Guy did not make a hostile move. The Kruna didn't let their guard down for even a second, for their opponent had so far proven to be capable of withstanding the eight of them combined.

Interestingly, the Shy Guy opted not go on the offense at all, even though he was in prime position to do so. He twirled his implement around a couple times as he stood up straight and brought it back around to his front. Whatever attack he had intended to put out appeared to have been canceled under his own power.

"Alright," said the brown-clothed Shy Guy. "I think that's enough." He sheathed his Povado Thumper, much to the surprise of the Kruna.

"He just talked!" Marut cried. "I thought he was a mute!"

His voice sounds a lot like the one I've been hearing... Daisy thought. *Why did you tell us to come here?*

Bowser stared down the pendant on the Shy Guy's neck. "That Alkemei of yours-"

"The Alkemei Zariah," the brown-clothed Shy Guy replied. "The Pendant of Multiplication. As you may have guessed, yes; it helped with creating copies of the stones and boulders from earlier and the copies of my Mirror Shield for my Mirror Edge Spell. I must say, you eight aren't exactly who I expected to encounter here..."

Bowser raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Your fighting styles," said the Shy Guy. "Not good, not bad...just, interesting; different...in some ways, reminiscent of the Kruna of old...but yours have a long way to mature..."

None of the elemental wielders had any idea as to what was going on now, but it became evident to them that the Shy Guy somehow knew of their status as Kruna. They dropped their guard and eased up their stances after Daisy gave them all a simple, relaxed gesture. The Kruna of Earth herself did not avert her stare from the Shy Guy when she did so, for he shifted his gaze to her shortly after finishing his previous statement.

"A quick question; for the earth wielder," said the Shy Guy. "What was that ranged technique you used just now?"

"That was my Seismic Wave," Daisy replied. "That should've flattened you."

"Seismic Wave? Really?" said the Shy Guy. "Because it looks to me like you used an imperfect Geovado. Maybe that's why it didn't 'flatten' me."

"Is this true, Daisy?" asked Ramona.

Daisy sighed. "I don't like calling the Seismic Wave an imperfect Geovado, but, that's probably what it oughta be called..."

"But why's that so?" Warra asked.

"My Seismic Wave is an 'accidental' technique, I guess," the Kruna of Earth said. "When I trained with Master Terran, I had a hard time getting the depth and scope for the real Geovado blast. I don't know why I could never get it, but he insisted that I not worry about it and just focus on the variant that I developed as a result. The Seismic Wave actually might have some more room for power and damage, but it only goes half the range at the very best."

"Thus, your Seismic Wave is a false technique," the Shy Guy said. "It's not true to what it's supposed to be."

"I wouldn't've been able to tell," said Ramona. "It seems like a solid technique in its own right. Besides that, Daisy's mastered the Nova Form, so I'm pretty sure she could go back and learn how to do the Geovado properly whenever she's ready."

"I don't think she'll need to," stated Warra. "The Vado blasts for all

elements are all long-range, are they not? She has that Shotgun technique of hers now, and while it doesn't entirely make up for a Geovado, why try and force a long-ranged attack into a close-range combatant's moveset?"

"Why do you think?" the Shy Guy replied. "Because if you are who you all are really supposed to be, I would expect mastery over the advanced set of techniques deemed essential throughout the ages."

"I've got mastery over the Nova Form, for Luma's sake!" Daisy grunted. "And you're saying that that's not good enough because I can't do a frickin' Geovado?!"

"Well, a Vado blast must be initiated by hand and without an elemental tool, first of all," said the Shy Guy. "So it's not just being able to use the full spectrum of established and proven techniques, but being able to use your element when you're without a tool for whatever reason. I would seriously be concerned if any of you found yourself unable to function without a tool."

Neva cringed. *But I use my Novado with my crossbow and bayonet,* she said in her mind. *I should keep quiet so he doesn't figure out that I can't use my element at all without a tool, because I got a bad feeling about where this is all going...*

"Of course, 'Daisy,' the fact that you're walking around without an elemental tool anyways helps your case," said the Shy Guy. "But I still would have expected more proficiency and capability from a Kruna."

"Oh yeah?" Daisy snarled. "I'd like to see you go Nova Form – *if* you even can!"

"For what purpose?" asked the Shy Guy. "As you can tell, I have no need for such a risky transformation. Don't try to divert the topic; I don't know whether I should put you at fault, earth wielder, or that Master Terran you spoke of."

"What are you saying?" Daisy asked. "Master Terran played a large part in building my craft! I'm more than glad he helped me with earth wielding!"

"Well, would you say he's to blame?" asked the Shy Guy.

"Don't mind him, Daisy," said Andrew. "From what you've told us about Master Terran, he sounds like an awesome dude! I learned a couple shadow wielding techniques from my cousin, and she always made me recite some dumb preamble every time we started training." He cleared his throat to make his voice as resolute as possible. "These are my elemental tools! There might be others like it, so I hope these are mine! I must master them as I must master my life! My blades without me are useless! I, without my blades, am *not* useless!"

"Interesting..." said the Shy Guy. "We had a very similar verbal creed in my time, but it seems modernization has altered the verbiage a tad too much for my liking..."

"From your time...?" Neva asked. "Wait...what?"

"Please, excuse my haste," said the Shy Guy. "I never introduced myself. I am Arka Knight. Yes, in ages passed, we recited a special creed before each mission of ours."

Ages passed... Daisy repeated in her mind.

Arka Knight's posture stiffened. "I welcome you, wielders of fate. I sense that you all possess great elemental abilities. Although, as you can probably tell by now, I won't say that I'm not disappointed. Your powers are between that of the pedestrian and of the elite, paling in comparison to Kruna of the past."

Andrew grimaced in anger. "Seriously, why does everyone keep saying that?! How hard do you think we're trying here? You think we're just lazing around, drifting through our quests? We stood up to some pretty nasty creatures, you know-"

"Hey, we just stopped the fight – don't start another one!" Bowser snapped at the shadow wielder.

"Yes, I am well aware of your battles," said Arka Knight. "You may have felled great fiends and defeated fantastical creatures...but for the destined elemental wielders that you are, your power would

disgrace the higher-ups at the Comet Observatory and beyond."

"No!" Andrew shouted. "Allies and enemies – King Sarasa, Marissa, Kokoro, Culex, Geno, King Boo, everyone at the Comet Observatory – I'm getting sick of hearing how 'mediocre' we are! What are we; the destined elemental wielders that suck?!"

"Interesting," said Arka Knight. "I see a sense of self-worth in you that is dependent on your power and influence, Kruna of Shadow. Is there perhaps a superiority you try to uphold to nullify feelings of inferiority?"

On impulse, Andrew shot a hand up in front of him and fired a burst of dark energy at Arka Knight. Just as quickly, the Shy Guy turned to angle his Mirror Shield at the incoming blast to reflect it back at Andrew. He could not react in time, and once again, the Kruna of Shadow's back struck the ground.

Ramona rushed over to Andrew in a hurry. "Let me help you! Are you hurt?"

"...Just my pride," Andrew muttered. "Unbelievable. We come here just to get scolded and criticized."

"Just what we need before a big battle, right?" Ramona said, smiling as she held out a hand.

"I understand that you have quite the mission ahead of you," Arka Knight said as Ramona helped Andrew up. "I have sat here for many years awaiting your arrival-"

"This tower had not even been here for longer than five days," Neva muttered, cutting him off. "What kind of math are you using talking about 'many years?' "

"You were all destined to be here in this nation and tower at this moment in time," Arka Knight continued, somewhat ignoring Neva's question. "Yes, your power for Kruna is on the low end, but I don't believe you are Kruna because of power alone. I don't mean to discourage you, but I also don't want you overestimating yourselves. You can't. Not in a dire situation like this."

Daisy nodded. "I suppose you know about Marissa and the Blood Moon, then?"

"Yes," Arka Knight replied. "I also know that she is already making her way to Castle Town."

"WHAT?!" Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, and Ramona all shouted in unison.

Marut looked at one of the many large windows in the room to take note of the golden-red sky. "We spent too much time here! It must be past five in the afternoon already!"

"I believe she is bringing the entirety of her hellhound horde as well," said Arka Knight. "She'll be entering through the east gate and will be performing her Blood Moon ritual at a special landmark of great significance in just hours. She may even be able to draw power from it earlier than expected."

"Well then we've all got to speed to Castle Town at once!" Warra said. "Please, remove that magic barrier trapping us on this floor and give us the key so we can get out of here!"

"It matters not how fast you can get there," Arka Knight responded. "You will not be able to prevent Marissa from drawing down power from the Blood Moon, nor will you be able to prevent her from casting the special ritual spell with the collected energy from her Power Vase."

"Heh; pessimist," Athelstan mumbled to Bowser.

"And how can you say with certainty that all this you've said so far is true?" asked Neva.

"This is all so cryptic and mysterious," said Ramona.

"But he's trustworthy," said Daisy. "He's definitely trustworthy. I can tell. We should heed what he has to tell us. Besides, he said he had been waiting for us and that we were all supposed to be here at this very moment. And look where we are; here and not at Marissa's Lair."

"What?" Warra sputtered out. "Daisy? Don't tell me that you believe we're going to lose!"

"No, not at all," Daisy said. "But if we listen to what he tells us, then we can make it so that we'll win!"

"You won't win no matter what you do," said Arka Knight. "I'm sorry."

"Okay; now that, I don't believe one bit!" Daisy asserted. "How can you possibly say something like that?"

"There is much I could tell you," said Arka Knight. "But not now. I will tell you this though; you will all have to embark on a fated journey through time."

"A fated journey through time?" asked Ramona. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You will learn more when the gears of fate turn," Arka Knight replied. "I would say more, but I have already taken up too much time."

"So why'd you spend all that time fighting us?" asked Neva.

"I had to test you," said Arka Knight. "I had to make sure that you're all ready to face Marissa, though the fact that you struggled against me is disconcerting, to say the least."

"But what does that matter if we're just going to lose?" Neva asked. "What? Are you saying we're supposed to lose a certain way?"

"Don't worry about that!" Daisy assured. "We're not losing, Neva! We're going to have an extra man on hand!"

"Do you mean Geno, Daisy?" asked Warra.

Daisy frowned but remained resolute. "Of course! Who else could I mean? He's been waiting for an opportunity like this his whole life! This is his chance to get even with Marissa!"

"How can you be so sure?" asked Bowser. "We haven't seen him at all since last night. Maybe DK can lend a hand, but it's pretty much

just going to be us eight."

"Geno has done what he could to get us ready," said Warra. "This is our fight to win. Let's not let his absence weigh on us..."

"And we're not going to lose because he's not there," said Andrew. "We are better than that."

Daisy sighed, her eyes becoming hazy as she turned her head and gazed at the ground. Her frustration was evident, but she didn't try to press the issue. With another deep breath, she looked up, her steely resolve as true as ever.

"Marissa is getting closer to Castle Town," said Arka Knight. "You must go. Before your departure, please, take the two treasures I have gathered for you. I collected them and held them for the day we would meet. They will prove to be of great value to you in your journeys. Know that all the questions you may have now will be answered in time. But for now, go bravely, Kruna. Destiny is waiting, and fate will find you. May we meet again in another time."

Arka Knight swirled around in a mini-cyclone, taking on the appearance of a spinning blur before disappearing just seconds later. The magical barrier locking the Kruna in to the eighth floor dissipated, restoring access to the floors underneath and exit from the tower. The key that was around the Stone Titan's neck from earlier dropped where Arka Knight formerly stood. Two treasure chests then materialized in the center of the room. One chest was green and silver with the air symbol above its lock, and the other chest was red and gold with the fire symbol over its lock.

Andrew looked at Bowser and Marut. "I think they're for you two," he said as-a-matter-of-factly.

"Really?" Bowser replied. "I wouldn't've thought. It really felt like I was blowing frost out of my nose this whole time."

"Just open the damn chests so we can go," Andrew said, laughing.

Athelstan went to go pick up the key as Bowser and Marut headed towards the chests. When the fire and air wielders opened them,

they found an Alkemei Pendant of Power resting in each one. Bowser and Marut both looked at each other, the look on their faces confirming for them both what the other had found inside.

"So what did he leave behind?" asked Neva.

Marut turned around and held up his pendant. "Two of these alkaline thingies."

"Alkemei, Marut," muttered Bowser, putting on his own. The gem in Bowser's Alkemei turned red when he finished fastening it around his neck just as the one in Marut's turned green when he secured his.

Bowser wasted no time in activating his Alkemei once the pendant linked with his elemental energy. In an instant, his whole sense of sight underwent an unreal change. He froze in place, sure to keep his head still in an attempt to grasp what had become of his vision.

"It's like I have a full 360-degree view of the entire 3-D plane..." Bowser murmured.

"For real?" asked Neva. "That probably would've helped earlier with those damned mirrors..."

"It feels like the more energy I put through the pendant, the sharper the image is," said Bowser. "If I let it use just enough energy to maintain a somewhat blurry scope of vision all around, I bet I could keep this Alkemei active at a low level indefinitely..."

"How do you work this thing?" Marut mumbled. "I don't know what I'm-"

He got cut off as his pendant glowed and he launched into the air, but he knew he didn't jump. He ascended higher up without a decrease in momentum. If he hadn't of angled his body and caught himself, he would have rocketed straight into the ceiling.

"Whoa!" Marut shouted. "Did I do that?" He looked down, expecting to fall to the ground. To his surprise, he didn't. He just levitated in midair. "Wait a minute... Can I actually..." He made a few quick forward and lateral shifts in the air, still with no decrease in height.

His eyes peered down as low as they could go without moving his head to notice a slight but consistent illumination from his pendant. A smile crept on his face as he murmured to himself, "No way..."

"Based on what I learned from the Comet Observatory's Cosmic Archives..." Athelstan said as he flipped through his notepad. "...Ah, Bowser; you've got the... Alkemei Kracielle – Pendant of Omnidirectional Vision. And Marut's got the Alkemei...Furaito. Alkemei Furaito – Pendant of-"

"FLIGHT!" Marut screamed, celebrating in the air. With crazy, nonsensical aerial acrobatics, he darted through the air in the room like a hyperactive bird. "THERE'S NO WAY WE'RE LOSING TODAY! LET'S GOOOOOOOOO!"

"You better be careful up there, fool!" Bowser shouted.

Ramona clasped her hands together. "I am so happy for him! He's flying!"

"Just like he always wanted to do," added Daisy. "Just like his uncle said he could do."

"No; better than he said!" exclaimed Athelstan. "He's *literally* flying too! Way to go up there, buddy! Hey – don't waste all your energy doing all that stuff!"

Daisy smiled as Marut continued zipping around above. *Your uncle would be so proud to see this, Marut,* she thought. *We're gonna go make some more people proud now, too.*

"Man, I don't understand anything that Arka Knight guy told us!" cried Neva. "None of it makes any sense! It seems like everything he said and did contradicted each other! It was so inconsistent!"

"Let's not worry about it now," Bowser asserted. "We can't dwell on it. Yeah, he was all over the place, but maybe this is the wake up call we needed – guys, we can't pull any punches tonight! Arka Knight came at us at full force and caught us off guard. It's a good thing he wasn't an actual enemy! We got away with that one, but Marissa won't be nearly as kind!"

"Gee, no pressure or anything..." Ramona mumbled.

"Bowser's right!" shouted Daisy, thrusting a fist up. "Let's not waste any more time! We need to make a move for Castle Town! There's a witch we need to take down!"

"Hold on – we need a plan," said Warra. "You do realize we'll be rushing into the whole hellhound horde, right?"

"I know," Daisy replied, smirking as she looked at Ramona and Andrew. "That may actually turn out to be exactly what we needed!"

Ramona raised an eyebrow. "Exactly what we needed..."

Daisy nodded. "Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Marut, and Neva; we're going to go to Castle Town, right away. You and Andrew, on the other hand, need to make a special trip."

Chapter XLII

The Living End :

Peach lay in her bed, the hour of the wolf deepening the early morning darkness as the moon began to descend from its apex. Lunar light shined through the windows of her surprisingly basic and simple bedroom that resembled one found in a middle class suburban house rather than as part of a regal castle. For as much significance as being the princess of the Mushroom Kingdom had, she felt she was no more special than the other citizens and didn't feel the need to have any extra more than the extra she already had.

She had her head propped up on her arms and a leg crossed over the other, her eyes staring straight up at the dark ceiling. Mario and Luigi were both out on a mission, likely not to return for at least a couple weeks. As per Wario, Bowser and the rest of the Kruna were in Sarasaland for some reason they never told either him, her or anyone else. Daisy had been gone; no letter, no phone call, nothing. Everyone was busy.

Peach felt an emptiness about the whole situation. Even with all the citizens in the Mushroom Kingdom, it still seemed empty there. She wondered if Daisy felt the same whenever everyone else had gone off on some mission or assignment or event and left her alone.

How wistful the past few weeks had been. The recent past seemed so far away. The near future stared Peach right in the face. She had no clue how, but she knew everyone else had to be feeling the same way, even as she lay there.

"The winds of change," she murmured as the outside breeze blew at her window curtains. She let out a deep sigh, then started singing to herself in a melodic whisper. "Things are gonna be different; changes of significance; I hope to see what awaits for me, and you..." Her voice trailed off, not because she forgot the words, but because the words were all too real. It was as if she would wake up tomorrow, and everything would be different; more different than

things had already become.

"I miss you, Daisy," she then said. "I really do. You've been gone for so long now... I really hope you're not off doing something stupid that you're gonna get yourself killed in..."

Peach sat up, a little unnerved by the thought. For as outgoing as Daisy was, she was equally as elusive and even a little aloof at times, so Peach had gotten used to her disappearing and reappearing without much notice. But for Daisy to not be back for nearly a month raised concern. Sure, she was always in and out of the Mushroom Kingdom, but it was never for so long, and she had always made sure to come back after a while.

I guess in a similar kind of way, Mario and Luigi do the same thing, Peach thought. *No doubt those two'll both be exhausted when they return...*

With that in mind, an idea popped in her head; one that would not let her fall asleep until she saw one particular thing...

"Six-thirty call!" an official yelled on the intercom. Her voice projected all throughout Castle Town. "Six-thirty call! We are less than an hour away from Bellbridge's opening!"

Darkness began to take over the red-gold sky as the sun reached the horizon line. The Harvest Moon Festival was well underway in Castle Town with people from all four kingdoms and all the assorted territories and jurisdictions of Sarasaland present to take part in the yearly commemoration and celebration of the moon. With such a large and significant event, numerous activities and festivities lined the Castle Town streets to make for a grand and glorious gathering with plenty of flare and energy for everyone of all ages, races, walks of life, and religious backgrounds.

Down towards the southern entrance to Castle Town, a large group of fire wielders, air wielders, and ice wielders were putting on a special effects show that had attracted an enormous crowd. Kiosks ran all along the blocks throughout the city with all sorts of

specialized items, foods, and souvenirs. Lights of various colors and sizes were in abundance, adding to the lively and charismatic atmosphere. For all of Sarasaland's troubles, it appeared as if the Harvest Moon Festival put them all on pause and pushed them away, even if only for the night.

"People of Sarasaland's Harvest Moon Festival," the official said through the intercom. "We all really do hope everyone's having a great time here! Don't forget about tonight's special occasion – we're having a Blood Moon! The moon will be superimposed in the sky! Better make sure everyone gets their prayers – and pictures in, for rarely do we ever have our great heavenly body as close to us as we will tonight!"

"Mommy, what's a Blood Moon?" asked a little boy.

"It's when the moon turns a metallic red-orangy color," his mother replied. "We haven't had one of those in a really long time!"

"We haven't?"

"Nope! Probably since before I was even born! This might mean that tonight's Blood Moon will be *extra special!* "

Not too far away from Bellbridge awaiting its opening, a group of college students were clustered together at the side of the road. They had been talking about the strange signs of confusion and panic that were popping up throughout the Sarasaland capital.

"Didn't you hear? There's some stupid rumor going around town about tonight's Blood Moon crashing into the Earth!"

"What? No way, that's ridiculous. Who was crazy enough to tell you some insane idea like that?"

"I thought the rumor was about the Blood Moon exploding from a comet!"

"I thought the rumor was about an alien invasion coming from the Blood Moon!"

"Wasn't some planet supposed to have crashed into us by now?

Maybe that'll happen tonight!"

"Ah, man, you shoulda seen it earlier! Some huge ape ran through here insisting that some demon witch was gonna make her way here and cause doomsday because of the Blood Moon!"

"He's had one too many bananas, I'll say."

Peach had slapped her clothes from earlier back on and drove her Royale over to Bowser's Palace. She found herself roaming through the halls, wide-awake and looking for the armory Toad and Alden had been working in. No one was inside when she saw it and walked in.

She stalked through the armory, passing several tables lined with works in progress, many more completed tools, the Radiant Claymore she had picked up earlier, and what appeared to be some sort of prototype robot labeled "Robotic Operating Buddy 4.1.4." None of it had any interest to her at that moment. She had one thing in mind to look for, something that she wasn't sure if she had seen earlier or not. Even so, she had assumed the armory to be the likely place to look for it.

And then she saw it, sitting in a special holster hung from just below the ceiling. The Koopa's Spirit, a two-handed sword of great girth and range, its hilt practically a reduced staff. Even for a being of Bowser's stature, the elemental tool could not be held without the prerequisite two hands necessary to stabilize and control it. But as long as two hands were used, any being of reasonable size could wield it to an effective degree.

With minimal hesitation, she went to get a chair so she could step on it and reach for the sword. She took it off its holster and grasped its hilt. As she hopped off the chair and planted her feet back on the ground, her mind flashed back to that one instance a couple years ago with Bowser and the Koopa's Spirit. *I'm glad I didn't do it* , she thought. *No way I could have brought myself to do it anyways...*

For a while, she just stood there with the great sword, a part of her

feeling some sort of pull or connection to it. She didn't understand why; she had minimal experience with a sword of its stature, and yet she felt more comfortable with it than any official Mushroom Rapier or Royal Spatha. On impulse, she pulled the Koopa's Spirit around and took a handful of swings with it. Every swipe felt crisp and smooth, as if the great weight of the blade moved with Peach rather than with gravity.

I feel like I need to take this with me, Peach thought. *But, I mean, that would be stealing, wouldn't it? No...well, maybe not... Why do I feel so compelled to take it?...*

She stood there for a little while longer, looking around the dark, silent room. The big blue digital numbers on the banner clock near the door read, "5:35 AM." Dawn would break soon.

I must be losing it, she thought. *Why would I come out here while everyone's asleep just to take someone's sword down and start playing with it? This isn't a good look for me at all.*

In a nervous, uncertain sweat, Peach put the Koopa's Spirit back on its wall holster and backed away from it. Despite the darkness of the room, the blade seemed to shine at her, even if only a little. Somewhat disturbed, she continued to backtrack until she turned all the way around and briskly walked out the armory.

Nova Daisy and her team, except for Ramona and Andrew whom she had ordered to go make a special trip, dashed north from the Stone Tower towards Castle Town as the last bit of sun faded from the sky. She had sent Marut ahead with his Pendant of Flight to recon over the Castle Town walls. When the Kruna of Air soared back to their position and made a landing, they came to a stop.

"Alright, Marut," said Bowser. "What did you see and where?"

"Guys – I got awesome news!" Marut exclaimed with joy. "You wouldn't believe what I got at one of the concession stands!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few baggies. "Twelve gold coins – four bags of Yoshi Gummies, each with four free bags of

Max Nuts! I know, right? It's like, I don't even care what happens for the rest of the night!"

"So I take it the Harvest Moon Festival's underway," Neva muttered.

"Focus, Marut!" snapped Daisy. "What did you see? Where's Marissa? The Sweeps? King Boo? My dad?"

"I don't know," said Marut. "All I saw from overhead was a large band of darkness coming from the east side. It was like from the northern end all the way down to the southern end."

"The hellhound horde," Warra murmured. "It has to be them..."

"We're going to need to go in from the southern entrance and work through to the east from inside," said Bowser. "We'll have an easier time pushing them back than trying to pull them back!"

"Then we're going to need to move fast!" asserted Daisy. "At least we're not too far away! We'll be there in just minutes!"

They took off up the path, sprinting as fast as they could, ignoring all the minor nuisance enemies that Sarasa Field housed. Judging by what Marut saw, the six Kruna's hands would not just be full, but overflowing once they got into Castle Town.

A massive crowd had gathered in front of the southern gate to Bellbridge before its opening. King Sarasa proudly stood to address the citizens of Sarasaland and the attendees and tourists of the Harvest Moon Festival. The collection of people increased as time elapsed, coming together from all parts of the festival to view the attraction and its grand opening to the public.

"I have been waiting for quite a while to finally announce the completion of our project here," King Sarasa projected. "It's been a long time coming, but the efforts put forward in our creations have gave way to something truly monumental and, I'll even say, legendary! Here in Sarasaland, we're not only about staying grounded, but also extending upwards into the heavens and rising above! So to help honor and commemorate the majesty of our great

moon, I present for the pleasure of all citizens throughout Sarasaland, Bellbridge!"

Raucous applause erupted from the crowd as more people filled in to join the mass. One of the guards marched over to the gate with a rainbow-colored key to undo the gold lock holding the barrier intact. The gate's doors swayed open, allowing entry to the path that would lead high up to the great glass and metal world above the city. The brilliant multicolored lights lining the ascent and the skywalk above provided wondrous contrast for the stars that had begun to show in the early nighttime sky.

"Hence forth, this massive skywalk complex will open every evening and close just before sunrise!" King Sarasa shouted. "Let this be a sign of good things to come for our great nation! Bellbridge is here to stay!"

"LAAAAAAME!" a voice called out. Her remark drew hushes and muffled confusion from the crowd as everyone looked up. Marissa and Naraka floated down from above on the witch's Mystic Broom, accompanied by King Boo. Their threatening presence prompted the nearby guards to get near the king as the demon witch and the black and silver-clothed Black Mage touched their feet down on the ground with the royal ghost sticking right beside them.

"I beg your pardon," grumbled King Sarasa.

"That's it?" asked Marissa. "Just 'Bellbridge?' That's it? It's supposed to be legendary, and that's all you could come up with? You should call it the 'Awesome Funky Groovy Gnarly Outrageous Way-Cool Mondo Tubular Bellbridge.' It makes it sound like its own special world!"

"Now that's just asinine," the king responded. "There's no way that name would ever work."

"Oh, of course you'd say something like that," Marissa remarked, making a disgruntled face. "Nothing's ever good enough for you!" She stuck up a lip and pushed out her chest. "Oh, I'm the king of Sarasaland! I only buy *name brand* groceries."

"Who do you think you are intruding on my grand opening with such tone, missy?" asked King Sarasa.

"Missy; pfft," mumbled Marissa, turning to King Boo and Naraka. "That's adorable – he thinks I'm young!"

"If you have nothing useful to contribute, you will need to leave!" demanded the king. "You're interrupting a very important address of mine!"

"Oh please!" Marissa snapped. "You act like you're actually doing something – anyone can shout and make a crowd go wild!"

King Sarasa raised an angered eyebrow. "Oh, is that so?"

Marissa turned to the crowd, taking a deep breath and clearing her voice. "Ahem... Reservitude. Maturatory. Crassimpathy. Innovasive. Solarectus-"

"What are you doing?" King Sarasa barked.

"Shh!" King Boo hissed at the Sarasaland Monarch.

King Sarasa threw his hands up, wide-eyed. "She's just making up words-"

"Consermitation," Marissa continued. "Potentiopaedia. Gonorrhighteous. Dedicatorian. Infundibulum. Triumphinatic. Inertional." She thrust a fist up to the sky, finishing with a strong, "Successidence!"

The crowd roared as if they had all lost their minds. Their enthusiasm reverberated throughout the area as Marissa rhythmically rocked her fist in the air. "Sa-rasa-land!" she chanted. "Sa-rasa-land! Sa-rasa-land!"

"Sa-rasa-land!" the crowd chanted back. "Sa-rasa-land! Sa-rasa-land! Sa-rasa-land!"

The crowd kept chanting as Marissa turned away from them and walked over to King Sarasa. The witch leaned in to his ear so that only he could hear her words. "Looks like you don't got as tight of a

hold on your so-called 'people' as you think you do. I just rocked everyone's world 'Arkana Style!' Waddup!" She then backed up and held a hand high as if she wanted to high-five him.

"Marissa is in rare form tonight, isn't she?" King Boo asked Naraka.

"I wish it was as uncommon as you think it is," replied the Black Mage.

King Sarasa backtracked a couple steps away from Marissa in disgust. "What the hell was that?"

"What the hell was what?" replied the witch.

"That!" the king snapped, pointing at the chanting crowd. "What you just did!"

"What do you mean?" Marissa asked, innocent but annoyed. "I just did what you do for a living. Why are you so surprised? I did the same thing you do on a daily basis."

"You did not!" King Sarasa barked.

"Making nonsensical noise in front of a bunch of sheep – why are we splitting hairs?" said Marissa.

King Sarasa stomped past Marissa to address the crowd. "All of you, quiet down! Now!"

The crowd slowly lowered its decibel level and returned to a normal, quiet volume. King Sarasa whipped back around to Marissa, King Boo, and Naraka, his voice flustered and frustrated when he spoke to them. "I should have you taken away for disturbing the peace and raising disorder! I'd like to know who you three hoodlums think you are barging in like this and disrupting our treasured festival in such a *ridiculous* manner!"

"I'm glad you asked, King!" Marissa said, twirling around in place. "Prepare for trouble!"

Naraka moved to offset his superior. "Better make it double!"

"A double-double ensemble in a triple ripple!" shouted King Boo.

Marissa smiled as struck a series of poses. "To shroud the world in devastation-"

"To conquer the evils of all the nations!" exclaimed Naraka.

"To announce the coming of a new world order-" Marissa said.

"To herald in our overwhelming takeover!" King Boo hollered. He looped up in the air before diving down to faze into the ground.

King Sarasa frowned. "What the hell is this-"

"Cower in fear at Lord Arkana's might!" Naraka shouted.

"Surrender now or prepare to fight!" yelled Marissa.

King Boo bolted out from underneath the ground, yelling, "Heh heh heh heh; that's right!"

"What the hell is this?!" King Sarasa griped.

"As we speak, my hellhound horde is dominating the outer reaches of East Castle Town-" Marissa said.

"Soon, they will begin their move inland and overrun the inner partitions of the district-" Naraka continued.

"And don't look now, but it looks like Cerberus is in town to light things up!" King Boo hollered.

"Hey," somebody in the crowd called out. "Isn't that the demon witch?!"

"It took someone *this* long to notice?" King Boo muttered. "The maid dress, the broom, and the pointy hat didn't give it away?"

"I told you that Halloween incident actually happened," said Naraka.

"Your helpless civilians and guards are the perfect sustenance for Cerberus, King!" Marissa finished. She turned to address the crowd. "You hear that everyone? Panic for your lives! It's doomsday!"

"Well, doomsnight," said Naraka. "But-"

"DOOMSNIGHT!" King Boo quickly added in correction. He raised an arm overhead to create a furiously crackling burst of red and green darkness that he proceeded to slash down at the panicking mass of people. In an instant, everyone in attendance turned to flee, though at least a dozen of the civilians got caught by the spectre's blast and got sent to the sides of the street, injured and semi-conscious.

"Vastus!" King Sarasa barked through his handheld radio. "I want you to ring in the entire military! The police! The National Guard! Special Forces! Everyone we have on hand! Pull from the four kingdoms! Castle Town is under attack! Do not hesitate to-"

A bolt of energy struck King Sarasa's radio and destroyed it before he could finish his statement. The king looked at Marissa and saw her broom up and glistening at its bristles.

"You got a good ratio of people here in the mix, Kingy," said Marissa. "Humans, koopas, goombas, Piantas, Shy Guys, Nokis; et cetera, et ce-ter-a... At least there'll be some variety at the cemetery, huh?"

"If the hellhounds don't get to them first," King Boo added.

"Foul fiends," King Sarasa muttered. "I don't have time to deal with you ghouls. I've got to protect this city, and I won't have you idiots all ruining one of our most time-honored and significant celebrations! I've got to move the troops and get you all and your demonic mutts out of here!" He turned to make a dash towards the Central Castle. "I'll see to it that you get your justice!"

Before the king could get much further than a few dozen yards, Marissa zipped by him and appeared right in front of him to cut him off. With the slowest motion she could smoothly manage, she traced the end of her broom up into the air until it got to within a foot from his chest.

"Where do you think you're going?" Marissa asked. "You're dealing with me."

King Sarasa scowled. "How dare you! This is supposed to be Sarasaland's night! This is supposed to be my night!"

"No no no, King," Marissa said. "This is *my* night."

Chapter XLIII

The Healing :

"Max Mushrooms?" the merchant koopa offered to two Monty Moles. "You want some? They're yours, my friends – as long as you have enough coins!"

The bartering between the merchant koopa and the two Monty Moles was disrupted as several groups of people stormed through the Castle Town streets in panic and distress. A few people rounded the corner the merchant had his Mushroom cart set up next to and almost ran into it, only for a couple more to actually brush by it. A quick and timely move by the merchant koopa ensured that his cart remained steady and that its contents remained safely secured within.

"Hey; what's their problem?" the merchant koopa asked with annoyance. Immediately after finishing his statement, he began to hear deep, rhythmic thuds coming from just around the nearby corner where the townsfolk had been fleeing from.

It was then that a massive shadow loomed overhead. The merchant koopa and the two Monty Moles looked up just in time to see a huge leg come down and step on the Mushroom cart. The titanic hellhound and its four Black Mage riders did not experience any break in stride or even so much as stop to see what they had crushed. They simply continued on their way, leaving the merchant koopa to stare wide-eyed at his flattened cart and pureed Mushrooms. The merchant turned red and squealed in distraught anxiety.

"MY MUSHROOMS!" the merchant koopa screamed. "WHY?! WHY?!"

Atop the lumbering hellhound, Marissa's other four Sweeps – Machula, Maki, Solovar, and Tamara – scanned the streets with the intent of clearing out as much of the area as possible before Castle Town made any retaliatory effort. The less people roaming around

the streets, the quicker the hellhounds could get inside and spread throughout the city.

"Cerberus here sure made short work of the south sector," said Solovar.

Maki sighed. "Yeah, that's a good sign, I guess..."

"What's wrong with you?" Tamara asked the white and silver-clothed Black Mage.

"Oh," said Machula. "I get it... You don't want to be here, do you?"

Maki shook his head. He looked depressed, even for a Black Mage's lack of facial features.

"Do any of us want to be here?" asked Tamara. "I think we all know that answer."

"I miss Marissa," said Maki. "The old Marissa. The fun Marissa. This Marissa now is just..."

"Broken," said Machula. "Erratic. Manic. Loony. Twisted."

"Gortox couldn't deal with her anymore," said Tamara. "So why are we still dealing with her? Aside from the possibility of her killing us, that is."

"But, she can change back, can't she?" asked Maki. "If we do what she says, and we have success here tonight, then, she'll go back to the way she was before, won't she?"

"I don't know," said Solovar. "I don't know if anything will ever be the way it was before."

"I think we're going to have to leave," said Tamara. "Maybe not right now, but, before the night's up. She just gets worse and worse by the day. I can feel she's on the verge of a breakdown at some point in the near future – and none of us wants to be around when that happens."

"But, friends stick together and are there for each other for the bad

times, right?" asked Maki.

"Yes," Solovar replied. "But at this point, are we still her friends, or just a means to an end?"

"And do you really want to be a means to an end just to appeal to someone who's already dead?" added Tamara.

Daisy, Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, and Neva dashed towards the southern gate of Castle Town to find the entrance surrounded by rows upon rows of hellhounds. The demonic dogs had already started storming into the city, overrunning the minimal resistance from the townsfolk with ease.

"There they are!" Daisy shouted. "We're gonna break up that mass!"

Upon getting close, Bowser dove into his Whirling Fortress to tear along the ground and rip into the wall of hellhounds. A burst of air from Marut increased Bowser's velocity and torsion for an even more devastating maneuver that crippled dozens of the fiendish canines. Immediately after finishing his move, Bowser snapped up into the air and released a veritable portion of fire energy in conjunction with the cyclone Marut sent his way to create their Torch Twister and clear away an even larger faction of the horde. The Torch Twister created a large radius of cleared land and blasted a sizable pathway through the hellhounds back out to the other Kruna before disbanding into the ether.

Daisy shot into the gap and charged energy through a fist to release her Shotgun blast and smack back a wide swath of hellhounds on one side. Warra's Sonic Clap knocked back and temporarily deafened a partition of hellhounds on the other side. But even with their formidable attacks, hundreds of hellhounds still remained and stormed into the city, with thousands more further north along the eastern Castle Town border. Even worse, through the southern gate, the Kruna saw a larger, more imposing figure moving about through the streets.

"Looks like Cerberus is up ahead!" said Athelstan. He put a shoulder

down and charged into a chunk of hellhounds huddled close together.

"Daisy, you go find Marissa," said Warra. "Don't waste your energy on all these hellhounds!"

"Are you sure?" Daisy asked. Her high-speed Crystal Kick cleared another line of hellhounds out of the way.

"Positive!" Bowser replied. "We can handle all of these mutts until Ramona and Andrew are ready!" A hellhound then leapt at him, but he caught the dog by its mouth and swung it around in an arc onto the ground.

Athelstan grabbed hold of Daisy and heaved her up overhead as he activated his Alkemei Odina. "Here's a boost to get ya through!" he yelled. With a running start, he wound up and launched Daisy over the hellhound horde. At the apex of her height, the Kruna of Earth curled into a rapidly rotating series of somersaults to propel her further past the demonic dogs and into a clearing beyond the southern entrance. The moment she touched her feet down, she pulled back to get ready to release another Shotgun, but before she could, Marut swept through the air and angled around Daisy. The Kruna of Air had his Lightning Blade technique ready and slashed it downwards to clear away and push back a significant portion of the hellhounds trying to advance past the gate.

"Awesome, Marut!" Daisy exclaimed with a thumbs up. "Keep it up! All of you!"

Daisy turned to sprint, but the moment she did so, a bright shine caught the the edge of her periphery. As she turned her head back around, she saw a wall of light energy rush through and widen the gap in the horde that Marut's Lightning Blade had created. Following the great beam of light from above, Geno led Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, and Neva through to rejoin Marut. Neva whipped around and fired off ice arrows at the dogs from her Frost Crossbow as if the tool was an assault rifle.

A series of cars and karts flipped into the air and came down on various groups of scattered hellhounds. The origin was unclear until

Donkey Kong came rushing around one of the street corners with one final kart in hand and hurled it at the horde like a screeching, possessed fastball. DK then ran over to join the group of elemental wielders, ready to stand against the thousands of hellhounds with them.

"Like we said, Daisy; we got this!" Athelstan yelled.

"Just go on ahead already!" Neva barked. "I thought you were supposed to be a fast earth wielder!"

Daisy nodded, not wasting time to say anything as she turned and dashed ahead through the streets. She replayed what Arka Knight had said earlier, about Marissa wanting to draw from the Blood Moon at a special landmark of great significance. Then she noticed the shining assortment of rainbow lights overhead further north and decided to head straight in the direction of Bellbridge's main entrance.

The hellhounds had already started making up for the losses in their ranks. The sheer magnitude in number of the horde seemed overwhelming; not in power or force, for the hellhounds individually proved to be not too much more powerful than other common enemies that the Kruna have faced, but for what their scope and range meant. What Geno, DK, and the Kruna stood against at that very moment and would be encountering throughout much of the eastern half of Castle Town was the culmination of several hundred years of kidnappings and mutations through Marissa Arkana's Betedaimon venom.

"We must split up," said Geno. "From what I saw earlier, we're going to need to account for the north and east Castle Town gates as well as the south one here."

"Then since air-head and I are the fastest here, we'll sprint up and cover the north," said Neva.

"DK and I can stay here to manage the south gate," said Athelstan.

"Bowser, you and Warra will have to go cover the east gate," said Geno. "I will go find Cerberus."

"Hold on – you can't handle that beast alone!" Neva exclaimed. "You'll die! I've seen what that three-headed hellhound can do!"

"And so have I," Geno replied. "Far more times than you have. I will be fine, and we have no time to bicker or raise dispute."

"I am here," Marissa said to King Sarasa. "I'm the one that you fear most. My coming was foretold. I've been working under your nose the whole time, and now that I'm here before you, I am going to show you what I am truly capable of. Bow down and submit to me, for I am taking control of Sarasaland. I am the true Alpha, and the ultimate Omega. There's contenders that wish they had power like mine, a lot of pretenders that try to emulate power like mine, a lot of wannabes that wish they had power like mine... Those fools don't know what they want; they don't know what they're trying to be, or who or what they're trying to surpass. You are one of those fools."

"Excuse me?" King Sarasa grumbled.

Before the king said anything more, a militia of elemental wielders and guards ran over and gathered around him. The group of twelve looked ready to defend their monarch, their tools, rifles, and elemental energies up and ready for a clash. King Boo and Naraka both kept quiet and still. Marissa looked unimpressed; bored, even.

"And just what do you hope to accomplish with these noobs?" asked Marissa. She opened her Malocchio Eye as she charged a burst of mystic energy through her palms and fired it at the militia. Though she aimed at the ground, the nature of the magic created a concussive effect that scattered and launched the elemental wielders and guards all across the street. Judging by the content look on her face, she had no intent to kill any of them.

When the elemental wielders and guards all returned to their feet and got a good look at the demon witch, they turned tail and fled. King Sarasa watched as his people utterly abandoned him without much second thought of leaving their leader unguarded.

"Cowards!" King Sarasa shouted back. "The whole lot of you! You're

all useless to me!"

"You see that, King?" asked Marissa. "They don't care enough for you to stay and fight."

King Sarasa then felt a sudden shift. It was as if a weight that he had been shouldering since childhood was slipping away and eroding from his consciousness. But before long, that pressure returned and pressed down on him once more as it had done for so long. He refocused his concentration on the witch, ghost, and Black Mage before him, not acknowledging the brief but surreal inner disturbance.

Marissa turned to address King Boo and Naraka. "You two can regroup with the other Sweeps and Cerberus. I'm going to handle this man...myself."

Naraka nodded, rising into the air alongside King Boo. The two drifted away towards the southeast of Castle Town where they caught sight of a faint silhouette of the titanic hellhound under the ever darkening sky. That left Marissa and King Sarasa alone with each other.

"Now then," Marissa murmured with malice. She spread her shoulders and deepened her voice as low as it could go. "As I was saying earlier... You do not yet realize your unimportance, but soon, you will discover how insignificant you are. Bow down to me so that I may sit on your face like the seat cushion you will become once I steal the throne from you."

"Never!" King Sarasa grunted, pulling out his Quake Breakers.

Marissa held up a fist. "If you only knew the power of the Arkana name-"

"Your power is fraud!" snapped King Sarasa. "I have dominion over these lands, and soon, much more! You are nothing!"

"But, King," Marissa said. "It runs in the family...for I...am your sister."

King Sarasa stumbled backwards in horror. "No... That's not true!

THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!" He dropped to his knees, too shocked to stand on his legs. "I DIDN'T KNOW I HAD A SISTER!"

Marissa didn't say anything for a moment, then replied in her normal voice, "Yeah, no. Not really. Just playing up the drama of the moment is all. Oh, and, obviously, thanks for bowing down to me like the little submissive pawn you are."

King Sarasa looked down and noticed his stature. In an instant, he shot back to standing, angered and vexed. "Are you toying with me like I'm some sort of imbecile?" he snarled.

"Yeah," Marissa replied with a shrug. She then tried to cover her mouth as she giggled.

A stray rock soared through the air and struck Marissa square in the jaw. Her head snapped around a full ninety degrees, putting a stop to her merriment. When she turned to look at her aggressor, her eyes narrowed in with hate on a small boy in tan and brown no older than thirteen. The boy was already set to throw another rock, though the sight made Marissa grin.

"Hey, you!" the boy screamed. "Your stupid dogs killed my mom!"

"Oh, did they?" Marissa asked. "I know they're probably causing plenty of havoc throughout the city here as we speak, and it's hard for my Eye to keep track of everything-"

The boy threw the second rock, hitting the witch's chest but not eliciting any reaction from her. King Sarasa watched, silent and unsure of what to do. Part of him didn't care about the child, but another part of him wanted to intervene and get the child a chance to escape. Marissa could easily kill the little boy, and yet that boy did not seem deterred at all. The boy stomped his foot into the ground to kick up any loose rocks and stones he could, then pulled them into his hands in a frantic effort of repeated peltings on the witch.

"Amateur stone wielder," Marissa said, getting hit with a rock every few seconds. "Can you at least try to summon rocks bigger than your undeveloped nether regions?"

The boy kept pulling up and throwing rocks and chunks of stone at the demon witch, but even though every last one hit her, they appeared to accomplish nothing more than minimal, barely noticeable damage. Marissa marched towards her adolescent aggressor as he continued throwing rocks at her. Although he did not give up on hurling the stones, he started crying when he saw how ineffective he was. It was not until Marissa had come to a stop right in front of his face that he finally ended his assault and bowed his head in sobbing defeat.

Marissa averted her gaze to the edges of her eye sockets but did not turn around at all to King Sarasa when she addressed him. "Anytime you want to step in and help a dear citizen in need, Kingy."

King Sarasa knew that Lord Arkana had just called him out, and yet, he still did nothing. He found himself frozen in place, wanting to run and round up the whole Castle Town Guard, but he felt compelled to defend the young boy from the imposing six-foot demon menace.

"Well, kid..." Marissa said, leaning over the boy's head. "You want your mommy back so bad? I'll do you a favor and send you on your way to her."

Marissa raised a hand and whiffed it around in the air a couple times to flare what appeared to be some form of golden magical energy in the shape of electricity. With her other hand, she snatched the boy by the collar of his shirt and lifted him up to eye level so she could stare straight at him. Tears streamed down the boy's face as his legs flailed about. He tried pulling Marissa's hand off him, but couldn't overpower her grip.

"Here's your right of passage, Rambo," said Marissa. "You get to go straight to the afterlife!"

Just then, a palm strike came and slammed into the side of Marissa's face. The attack sent her hurtling at a nearby building in a twisting bullet, though she expelled a burst of energy and caught herself in the air just before crashing. Even though she hovered practically upside-down at that moment, she did not doubt what her vision discerned.

Just in front of the boy who lay on the ground, Daisy stood, Nova Form eyes exhibiting laser-like focus on Marissa. King Sarasa didn't recognize the Kruna of Earth at first, but frowned the moment he did. *What happened to her hair?* he thought. *And why is her skin so shiny? I thought she was a beast the last time I saw her! Has she uncovered a secret within the human body? Perhaps...an immortality secret? Is that what one looks like when one is immortal?!*

Marissa slowly rotated around as she floated in midair until she was right-side up, then touched her feet back down on the ground. "Ah, yes," she said with a sigh. "It's about time you showed up...still in Nova Form, no less."

"I haven't transformed out of it since the day I changed back to normal," Daisy said.

Nova Form? King Sarasa thought. *My own daughter? So this is what Nova Form looks like? On my own daughter, no less!*

"Go on," Daisy said to the boy, not turning to face him. "Get out of here. Now."

Without hesitation, the boy scrambled to his feet and fled away from the standoff between Daisy, Marissa, and King Sarasa. He dashed around a corner, disappearing from sight.

Of course, the king mused, sweat beading on his head. *Why would I think that anyone would be closer to immortality than I am? But still, how does my daughter have such a potent ability?*

"I'll be honest, Sarasa girl," said Marissa. "I was expecting billowing rage from you and screaming fury, but although I do see some anger, you're a lot more tame than I thought you would be."

Daisy stood tall and proud, stance spread just a bit and fists clenched with low tension. "Get ready, Marissa. I want you to know that you brought this upon yourself. It's because of you that I now have Nova Form mastery. I am the Nova Form. It's all thanks to you."

"I...can't believe..." King Sarasa stuttered, staring wide-eyed at Daisy. "...How much you've changed..."

"Thanks to me?" Marissa asked.

"I would not have been able to reach this level if it weren't for that Betedaimon body," said Daisy. "That was the key to unlocking the Full Power Nova Form!"

Marissa chuckled a little. "Really, you should've turned into one of my hellhounds, not that half-whatever-it-is that you were when you were first introduced the venom. It would've been great to sic you on your dad over there."

"I'm not one of your tools, Marissa," said Daisy. "Nor am I yours either, Dad. I'll deal with you in a minute."

King Sarasa gasped and then grimaced. "Why you ungrateful little..." His voice trailed off in uncertainty as feelings of faintness and fatigue began running through him.

Daisy crossed her arms, a smug grin ever so slightly easing its way on her face. "I bet you think you've got a pretty good stranglehold on Castle Town right about now, huh Marissa?"

"I reckon I do," Marissa responded.

"Hey – if anyone's in control of this city *and* this nation, it's me!" exclaimed King Sarasa. "I am the king here!"

"Hmm... Yes, you are, aren't you?" Marissa asked, smiling and batting her two normal eyes.

"You're not going to be in charge, Dad," said Daisy. "Not unless you can change your ways, and even then, you've got a long way to go!"

"Look at you and your cheeky bravado!" Marissa shouted with glee. "It almost sounds like you're up to something!"

Daisy gave no reply. She kept her eyes narrowed, grinned, and began chuckling.

"You *are* up to something, aren't you?" Marissa coyly asked. "I almost wish I had a Pendant of Telepathy to figure out what you're not saying! C'mon, be a sweetie and tell us what you're hiding!"

Daisy tilted her head up, replying with quiet simplicity, "Nothing anymore."

Marissa and King Sarasa both perked up, sensing an energy signature they had previously not encountered before. Not only was the power massive, but it had a special mystique to it that set it apart in a class of its own. Daisy started giggling again. Her giggling eventually evolved into laughter, making Marissa wonder if the energy signature she sensed was coming from the Kruna of Earth.

"Just what are you laughing about, Sarasa girl?" asked Marissa.

"Why don't you shut up for once and look up?" Daisy replied.

Marissa and King Sarasa glanced directly up into the still darkening sky and saw a shape, part-humanoid, part-other, hovering in the air high off the ground and higher than Bellbridge. Neither of the two appeared to have expected such a sight, nor did they have any clue as to what it could possibly be, but Daisy looked as comfortable and confident as either one of them had seen her, if not more.

Somewhat annoyed, Marissa activated her Malocchio Eye to get a better view of the figure overhead of Castle Town. What her Remote Viewing showed her did not sit well with her.

Warra's Aquavado pushed back a mass of hellhounds through Castle Town's eastern gate as Bowser followed up the great column of water with his Tavado to wreak even more havoc on the horde. The amount of hellhounds spread up and down along the eastern boundary of the city made the two Kruna question if they would run out of energy too early. Their concerns went away when they saw two large bursts of light and shadow blast away more from the wall of hellhounds. Ramona and Andrew came up from behind Bowser and Warra, neither of them worried about the vast number of hellhounds.

"We ran into several hellhounds running amok throughout the city as we looked for you," Ramona said. "I take it that you all split up?"

Bowser nodded. "We had to – the scope that these hellhounds have forced it. So did you guys get it done?"

"I'm starting to pick up on a familiar energy signature!" Warra exclaimed.

Andrew pointed up into the sky towards the center of Castle Town. A large, vampiric-looking being high above had his arms spread out as a wave of translucent white and silver light emanated from and around his form.

"Hey! Cool!" Donkey Kong exclaimed, pointing to the sky. As Athelstan kicked another car at the increasing hordes, he sensed what DK was talking about and looked up after he watched his makeshift projectile knock out a large partition of hellhounds. They both saw the imposing saint up in the sky whose presence had alarmed the hellhounds before them.

"Well, looks like Ramona and Andrew are back," said Athelstan. "They made great time!"

"They went and got *him* up there?" DK asked.

Neva and Marut only had to deal with about a third of the hellhounds that the rest of the team had to deal with, but the dogs had all stopped in their tracks just as the figure hovering high over the center of Castle Town increased the size of his misty light. The two Kruna looked up in the direction the rest of the hellhounds were staring in and caught sight of the same figure.

"Man, still just as scary as before," Marut mumbled to himself.

"Alright; we're not wasting any more energy on these mutts," said Neva.

Several of the guards, sentries, and vigilantes battling the hellhounds that breached through to the Castle City interior all stopped and looked up to see the figure and his expanding light high in the air. None of them had any clue as to who it was, but they all noticed that his presence distracted the hellhounds they had been fighting.

"What's going on?" one of the guards asked.

"Maybe this really is doomsday!" another cried.

"No, that's not it," said another. "I don't think, at least..."

King Boo put up a veil of darkness to absorb the laser Geno fired at Cerberus to protect the great hellhound while it prepared its special Column Lightning technique. So far, Geno had been very cautious in confronting Cerberus, but King Boo and Naraka's recent appearance meant that the cosmic being was outnumbered seven-to-one. The battle had not lasted too long before the five Sweeps atop Cerberus and King Boo glanced up upon sensing the formidable energy signature to catch sight of the saintly being in the sky.

"Well, it's been quite a while since I've seen him," said Geno.

"Who the hell is that supposed to be?" asked King Boo.

"No... Why is he here?!" asked Naraka.

"How is he here?!" asked Tamara. "I thought he was a myth!"

The silvery energy around the Dark Knight, Culex, expanded like a veil towards the outer regions of Castle Town. With every hellhound within or near the Sarasaland capital, Culex was in prime position to use his powers to quell the horde once and for all. His vortex of energy continued to grow until its scope extended well beyond the Castle Town boundary. The mystical, translucent hue drew the

attention of all beings within Castle Town and all those throughout Sarasa Field.

Culex's gathering and charging went on for several moments before the massive sheet of blurry white and silver light descended down onto the town. As the mystic swath drifted over the area, the hellhounds all collectively buckled and collapsed. Cerberus seemed unaffected, but the rest of the horde contorted and twisted around in place as their bodies began to shimmer and glow.

All throughout the area, the hellhounds trembled and shook. Their bodies transformed and morphed into their prior states before the introduction of their venom; regular people of various races and walks of life, some who had just recently succumbed to the venom and others who had transformed centuries ago. Everyone in Castle Town watched as more hellhounds reverted back to normal. Soon, all the unrest that had been caused by the hellhounds ceased to exist. The people cured of the Betedaimon venom and hellhound forms rose from the streets in a daze, none of them remembering anything past their initial mutations.

In one section of Castle Town, a hellhound had cornered a little girl in an alleyway. The girl had been screaming and crying throughout the mass purification, unaware that the fiendish dog before her had been healed until she heard it stop growling. When she opened her eyes, she cried even more once she saw who it was.

"Dad! Daddy!" the little girl cried, running to her confused and faint father. "It's been so long!"

"What?" the father said. "I don't understand... Am...I alive?"

Thousands and thousands of people now back to normal stood or sat in wonder and dizziness. They knew not what they had done as hellhounds nor did they have any understanding as to why they were all where they were at that very moment. It seemed as if time had froze for them for the duration of their mutated states. Everyone in some form or another just wanted a return to normalcy, but as long as Marissa, her Sweeps, King Boo, and Cerberus still lurked within Castle Town, normalcy would have to wait.

Chapter XLIV

Sever the Wicked :

"That maneuver has used all but a parcel of my power," Culex echoed overhead of Castle Town. "I have done what I can, Kruna. I must retire and recuperate. Now fulfill your end of the bargain... Everyone in Castle Town must evacuate and give the Kruna here the space needed to quell the threats plaguing the city. It is no longer safe here for civilians and amateur wielders..." In a wild flash of light, Culex's body distorted and disappeared.

The Kruna that had split throughout Castle Town directed the people in their respective sections of the city out with little hesitation. Within just a few minutes, nearly all the citizens had made their way out into Sarasa Field. Donkey Kong went to go and clear out anyone in the western half of Castle Town who may have not got the message and who could still be lingering while the Kruna closed in on Cerberus' and Geno's energy signatures. They had all figured on their own that the large number of other powers gathered near Geno had to be King Boo and the Sweeps, meaning that the cosmic being would be outnumbered, and consequently outmatched, if they did not hurry up and regroup with him in time.

"That puts an end to the hellhound horde," said Geno.

"This is your doing, isn't it?!" King Boo shrieked. "No, I bet it was those meddlesome Kruna that caused all this, wasn't it?"

"Cerberus, attack!" Solovar barked.

The three heads of Cerberus roared in tune with the three large prisms of lightning that appeared high overhead. The prisms rotated around the street and danced over Geno, bolts of electricity zapping down to the ground within moments. The former Kruna Genesis of Light just narrowly escaped the vicious streaks of energy that seemed to fry the very air they shot through.

Before Geno turned around, one of Cerberus' heads was already charging a massive burst of ice. King Boo appeared just offset of the cosmic being and rammed into him to knock him off his feet, at which point Cerberus released his ice blast. As Geno tried to press himself off the ground, the ice smothered him and frosted much of his body. Rendered immobilized, Geno found himself helpless at the hands of his opponents.

"It won't matter," said Naraka. "None of what you and those petulant Kruna have done to get in our way won't matter at all. We will execute every last one of you."

"I doubt that very much," said Geno.

"You're in no position to challenge," said King Boo. "You're frosted, chilled, and iced-down! You better hope there's no fires around – that might get you melted and freed, but I don't think your wood-based body would take too kindly to it... Speaking of which..."

One of Cerberus' other heads charged a sizable fireball in his mouth, but before he fired it off, a larger, more potent burst of flames struck him in the head and broke his flow of energy. The frost covering and immobilizing Geno then detached from his body and shattered around him. From one end of the intersection coming from the south, Athelstan ran into view. From the opposite end of the street, Neva and Marut both dashed down to cover for Geno. Bowser, Warra, Ramona, and Andrew entered the intersection from the eastern side and spread out once they saw Cerberus getting riled up.

"Good; you're all in one spot," King Boo remarked. "Now we don't have to track you down."

The five Sweeps disembarked from Cerberus and hovered in the air along with King Boo. The six entities then backed away, non-verbally cutting Cerberus loose and giving the hellhound some space.

"Cerberus can definitely eradicate all eight of them, can't he?" asked Machula.

"Most certainly," said Naraka. "Especially coming off the large boost in power from his last revival. At this point, those eight down there should be like Goombas to Cerberus."

"The only Goombas here are you six still taking orders from Marissa!" Bowser snapped.

Naraka flinched in midair. "How dare you say something like that! Marissa is a god compared to you all! Marissa is our most cherished and respected friend and sister! We are like family to her! We adhere to her wishes on our own accord! Don't we?" He turned to the other Black Mages, expecting passionate and immediate responses from them. Instead, he got awkward silence. None of the Sweeps felt comfortable adding anything on to what their fellow Black Mage had said.

King Boo smiled. "For what it's worth, I haven't known her for much longer than the several months she kept pestering me to ally with her, but it has been a pretty fun experience. And the power boost from this Mark of the Witch isn't half bad either!"

"Why aren't the rest of you guys saying anything?" asked Naraka.

"Don't worry about it, man," said Maki. "Really."

"But I *do* wanna worry about it," said Naraka.

"Now's not the time for such a subject!" exclaimed Machula. "Sic Cerberus on those Kruna down there!"

"Now hold on," said Naraka. "I do believe that this is the time; the best time now more than ever! No matter the outcome here tonight, everything's going to be different from here on out! You all hesitated just now, so tell me already; what's going on?"

Tamara grunted in impatience. "Oh, for the love of all things paper – Cerberus! Demolish!"

Cerberus' three heads growled and roared as a large, ghastly purple octagram bordered and outlined with dozens of ancient markings appeared in the sky overhead. A second, somewhat smaller octagram with an entirely different set of markings descended out of

the first, though it remained linked to the first one through several strands of energy. The two octagrams, now only separated by a couple dozen feet, began revolving in opposite directions.

Ramona felt her heart sink. "I don't like the look of this..."

"Get ready!" Bowser shouted to the team of elemental wielders. "This doesn't look like anything to hold back against!"

"It isn't," Geno said. "Cerberus is preparing one of his most devastating techniques..."

"Right off the bat like that?!" asked Marut. "We like, just got here!"

Marissa's teeth clenched as she grunted and scowled in place. She had quite a few things in mind to say, but she restrained herself. She felt that if she tried to say anything at that moment, all that was in her mind would flood out at once and make her speech an incoherent, angered mess.

Daisy unfolded her arms, her expression turning dark. "Amusing little game...but it's over now. No more hellhounds."

"What?!" Marissa snapped.

"Warra and Neva figured out everything," said Daisy. "All this time that you were here in Sarasaland, you've been using your Betedaimon venom to mutate whatever citizens you wanted to into hellhounds. Well, the same being that cured me from the venom's effects has just vanished from the sky after curing everyone else afflicted with it. I had Ramona and Andrew go and fetch him over here to work his magic."

"Damn..." Marissa hissed, indignation fueling her mind. *I had you in my hands...* she thought. *I should've destroyed you when I had the chance... By letting you live on as that mutated freak, I not only gave you the chance to develop your power even more, but I opened up the opportunity for something like this to happen...*

Daisy looked furious but calm. The smugness she displayed earlier

had disappeared, now replaced with the utmost seriousness. Awestruck to see her there the way she was, King Sarasa couldn't keep his eyes off of Daisy for more than two seconds.

"Heh... Sarasa scum," Marissa hissed, grinning as veins became visible in her neck. "Now you've got me mad. And I'm mean when I'm mad." Her Malocchio Eye flashed a glossy shine as she finished her statement.

"All those hellhounds were running about in Sarasaland this whole time?" asked King Sarasa. "Those were all *my* people?!"

"They were all Sarasaland's people," said Daisy. "Maybe you should've been paying more attention to why so many of them were disappearing around here instead of staying trapped in your narcissistic ways."

"I've had about enough of your mouth, young lady," King Sarasa grumbled.

"I met Elkon, Dad," Daisy said, practically forcing her words out. "You're gonna pay for what you did to him. Elkon was a person, not some tool to fuel your own personal gain."

"Elkon?" King Sarasa asked. "I don't remember any 'Elkon.' I do remember an 'Erebus!' Yes, that's right-"

"His name was Elkon," Daisy sharply replied. "You can call him 'Erebus' all you want, but I know who he was. Erebus was your tool for destruction and domination. But before he became Erebus, Elkon was just another one of us – a person sharing every right in this world that we have."

King Sarasa's frown dropped further. *She knows too much,* he thought. *How does she know of all this?!*

"That's right, Father," Daisy remarked, sharper than before. "I know everything that you tried to keep in secret. Master Terran, Elkon, Kokoro – they all told me everything I needed to know-"

"To do what?" asked King Sarasa. "What could you possibly do to me? I am a god compared to you-"

"Excuse me," said Marissa. "But you're just barely scratching demigod territory here on a good day. I'm the real deity here. You're just a wannabe."

"How sad it is," said Daisy, stern in tone as she stared down her father. "The person at the top of the hierarchy in this nation is the one with the worst character."

"You turned it down, Daisy," said King Sarasa. "Your words are empty." He then smiled. "But it appears to me that you want to challenge your old man, so how about it?"

Daisy got in position to fight, gritting her teeth. "If you want to call it a challenge, then yeah, but I feel that a bludgeoning is more appropriate."

"Better watch out, Sarasa girl," murmured Marissa, twirling her broom around as she leaned back and got into position. "Put too much focus on your dad, and you're history." She looked at King Sarasa. "And don't think you're any safer than her, either...mortal."

"I have a right mind to take you out first, witch," said King Sarasa. His eyes then shifted back to the Kruna of Earth. "Nova Form or not...I see that I'm going to have to put you in your place, child. As far as I'm concerned, Nova Form just makes you look more like the rude, petulent troublemaker that you are. I have the science and technology of The East's best doctors and chemists."

"Alright," said Daisy. "If you think that'll make any sort of difference; but I wouldn't bank on it if I were you."

The double octagram continued to intensify in rotation speed and glow as Cerberus shuttled more power through to it. Marut pulled out his ninjato to create a wind attack, but the moment he took aim, a small laser hit him in his arm. Oddly enough, he knew it didn't come from the Sweeps or King Boo because of the lateral nature of the miniscule light beam. He looked around and saw Geno with an open hand and came to the conclusion that he must have fired it at him.

"We can't attack him while he's charging the move," Geno said. Though he spoke to Marut specifically, he motioned around to the other Kruna after finishing his statement. Except for Marut, they all got the memo.

"Why not?" asked the Kruna of Air.

"The technique will run its course on its own without Cerberus' influence or control," said Geno. He then added, "The Birabuto Desert used to be a lot smaller than it is today."

"So?" Marut replied. "What does that got to do with anything?"

"Please take the hint, bro," Bowser muttered.

"C'mon everybody!" King Boo shouted. "Say it with me! Eaten by the grue! Eaten by the grue! Eaten by the grue!"

"This attack is going to bring about a fate far worse than devourment," said Machula.

"Complete obliteration," Maki said under his breath.

"That double octagram overhead acts as a portal for something heinous," Geno said to the Kruna. "A black and purple mass of material unknown to our world that seems to be a cross between an ultra dense metal and pure energy. I can only describe it further as a Dark Meteor. I can drive it back with my light energy for sure and force Cerberus to cancel the technique, though I may need your assistance because of Cerberus' power increase, Ramona. The rest of you will need to cover for us in case the Sweeps get restless and counter."

The Kruna of Light nodded, running over to stand with Geno. "I'll do my best!" The other Kruna ran up and took position nearby, just offset the two light wielders.

"You all are doubting Marissa in some way or another, aren't you?" Naraka asked the other Black Mages. "

"Naraka!" Tamara exclaimed. "Just...just... Can you just... Okay?"

"Just what do they think they're doing down there?" asked King Boo, staring at the Kruna. "They're just making it easier for Cerberus to target them!"

"You all forget," said Naraka. "Marissa brought this creature here so many years ago, but she bound his existence here to me, which means that I am second-in-command of this beast after her." He looked down at the three-headed hellhound. "Cerberus! Cease and stall!"

The two octagrams in the air stopped their rotation and froze as Cerberus paused his charging. The hellhound made no further moves, instead fidgeting around in place as he awaited the command to resume. The other Black Mages all gave Naraka dumbfounded but understanding looks.

"Now's the chance to attack!" Geno exclaimed to the Kruna.

"I thought you said we couldn't attack while Cerberus is preparing the technique!" Marut replied in confusion.

"We can't attack Cerberus because he'll lose control of the technique," said Geno. "But we can attack the octagrams!" He raised an arm and fired off a potent light beam. Ramona put two hands together and did the same.

Both of the light wielders' attacks struck the bottom portion of the layered octagrams, at which point Bowser fired off his Tavado and Marut his cyclonic Aerovado. Their combined efforts shattered the bottom octagram like glass and then pressed on the top octagram. A boost from Andrew and Warra's elemental blasts forced the remaining octagram to give way and snap into several hundred shards. All the countless glowing pieces rained down from above and evaporated after bouncing on the ground.

"Now look what you've done, Naraka!" King Boo shrieked. "You wanna argue, fine! But don't bring Cerberus into this when he should be destroying those Kruna!"

"It was probably for the better," said Naraka. "Marissa wanted to use Bellbridge for her Blood Moon ritual and her special ritual spell. That

Dark Meteor would've decimated that skywalk along with most of Castle Town."

"Well then maybe we need to have Cerberus initiate the Dark Meteor again!" Tamara snapped.

Naraka paused for a moment, alarmed. "What are you saying?"

This isn't about personal payback, Daisy thought. Her, King Sarasa, and Marissa had spread out across the street in front of the main entrance to Bellbridge. The demon witch held her broom behind her back, poised to whip it forward the instant someone got near. The king stood tall with his Quake Breakers crossed in front of him, appearing to be mostly in a defensive stance.

They both know that I want to attack... Daisy said in her mind. *I don't like the look of this. They must have a defensive maneuver or even a counter ready...* Her expression intensified. *I'm going to have to try and either put this one away early, or let them play their hands first so that I can better retaliate later on. But I don't know if this is going to be a battle that I want to drag out,* especially *with Marissa involved...*

Out of nowhere, Marissa started giggling through her malevolent smirk. Daisy looked at the witch, whose whole upper body twitched as she giggled like some playful little kid. *What are you laughing for?* Daisy wondered.

"Cut out that incessant noise!" King Sarasa yelled.

Marissa ignored him and continued giggling, except now holding her free hand in front of her mouth. The witch didn't appear to be looking at either one of the Sarasas. She instead stared at the Bellbridge gate and the Sarasaland Campanile in the distance behind the Central Castle up north.

Daisy's eyes shot wide open. *What time is it?!* she thought. She glanced up at the sky to try and find the moon. The celestial body, although not too high up in the sky yet, had started to take on a

slight orange tinge towards its bottom quadrant. The moon had just slipped past the Sarasaland Campanile. The great tower's grand clock displayed a little more than three hours left in the day, though it appeared that the Blood Moon would occur well before midnight struck.

"It's hard to get the timing of things down sometimes," Marissa then said, ending her marathon giggling. "But even so, it's the event that just gets me so cheerfully giddy."

"I've had enough of this nonsense," King Sarasa grumbled. He put away his Quake Breakers and switched his stance, changing things up as he stretched out his right arm. Dirt, soil, and clay from nearby gravitated around the entire outstretched limb from hand to shoulder to form a massive earthen arm double in size. With his fortified arm ready, he dashed at Marissa.

Attack chance! Daisy yelled in her mind. She dashed at Marissa too, but as she did so, she noticed an open area in her dad that she pulled around and angled herself to charge at. Just as King Sarasa got next to Marissa, Daisy zipped in and swung her leg up through an exposed gap to strike him in his torso and knock him back to where he started.

This isn't about personal payback, Daisy thought, looking at her dad get back up. *I have to make sure I beat them both.*

Marissa had not even so much as flinched. "Aw, thanks for the save, sweetie! Not like I couldn't have held him off myself, but it's the thought that counts."

"Don't flatter yourself," Daisy spat out, taking a leap backwards.

Marissa smirked. *I bet you're trying to take daddy out first so you can keep him safe from me,* she thought. *I can tell just from the way you're looking at me, Sarasa girl. If you want a showdown, then fine...but I can't guarantee that no one else is gonna get hurt in the process!*

Before Daisy could even make another move, a leg bashed into her side and sent her tumbling on the ground into a nearby building. The

attack felt surprisingly powerful, but it didn't come from Marissa. The leg that had hit her was attached to King Sarasa, whose arm had reverted back to normal. When the Kruna of Earth looked up, the surprise of her father's force and quickness hit her.

Marissa hushed a snicker and gave a handful of quick claps before pulling her broom back behind her. "I must say, that was marginally impressive, Mr. Sarasa. I now disrespect you slightly less."

Daisy kept quiet as she pressed herself back to her feet, though her intense expression told another story. Her tone was hauntingly low when she did speak. "Wow, Dad. This might take longer than I thought."

"Where do you think you got your physical talents from, Daughter?" King Sarasa replied. "It's good to see you at least developed them and put them to use, but you weren't supposed to use them against me."

"Actually, I was," Daisy said. Forcing energy through her arms, she got in position to ready her Seismic Wave. "And I am. And I will. All your talk about leading and ruling that you try to force through my head and tried to before; it's all coming back around full circle to bite you!"

"And how would you know anything about leading?" asked King Sarasa. "You never even wanted control over Sarasaland when I was willing to hand it over, and you're not fit to lead anything as you are now. You don't have the ability to enforce your dominion, even now, after all this time-"

"A leader does not exercise or force control!" Daisy barked. "A leader acts as guidance, as a nucleus to one whole! My team has faith, respect, and trust in me! I don't have to worry about mutiny or uprisings like you do, because I lead only those who choose to follow me. That's the difference between being a true leader and being a tyrant like you."

The Kruna of Earth brought her hands forward to unleash her great beam of seismic energy. Luckily for her, King Sarasa and Marissa were both relatively within the Seismic Wave's scope, with Marissa

further back and behind the king. Despite Daisy's Full Power Nova Form and her potent elemental energy attack, neither of her two opponents moved from their spots.

King Sarasa took out his Quake Breakers and crossed them in front of his body as he stepped to center himself in front of the blast. With great concentration, he blocked the incoming wave of energy and formed a link to attract the earth power into his blades. It took several seconds for Daisy to notice what the king was doing before she finally cut off the energy flow to her Seismic Wave and canceled the attack. By absorbing the energy into his chainsaw tools, King Sarasa had rendered his daughter's attack ineffective. Now he stood with two obnoxiously glowing and tremoring silver Quake Breakers.

In an interesting move, instead of trying to whip around and release the captured energy at Marissa, King Sarasa slashed his tools and sent the mass of collected power back at Daisy. The energy came too fast for Daisy to effectively counter, so she put her arms up and braced for what turned out to be a brutal impact. As she did all that she could to stay on her feet, she wondered if her dad had added some of his own energy to the pool of hers that he had collected before sending it her way.

Daisy grunted and grimaced as she tried to control the shifting and jostling pain that ran through her body. "Damn... That wasn't smart at all. I should have seen that coming, but I didn't expect you to capture and counter in such a way!"

"It's not that complex. Honestly," said King Sarasa. "I guess you would be able to do that if you had some proficiency with an elemental tool – or any weapon for that matter. I guess you would be able to do that if you even had any proficiency on the defensive side of things."

Daisy cocked an eyebrow as she stared down her dad. *Wait a minute!* she thought *. How does he know my fighting style and tendencies if he hasn't seen me fight before? He couldn't've known unless someone told him, and the only person that could have told him was Marissa, but why would Marissa tell him? What would be the motivation? She would gain nothing from doing that, right?*

"And how would you know something like that when you've never seen me fight before?" asked Daisy.

"Intuition, I suppose," replied the king. "I am your father, after all."

Daisy frowned, her eyebrows accentuating a focused arch. *I don't buy that at all! Somebody I had fought in the past had to have come here to tell him...but who, and for what motive?*

Marissa fired off an impromptu blast of golden magic power at King Sarasa, only for the Sarasaland monarch to turn once he noticed the flashing behind him, catch the blast with his Quake Breakers, and then angle around and send it in Daisy's direction with extra speed behind its trajectory. The Kruna of Earth clasped two hands together and swung upwards as the blast got close to send it up into the sky.

"Not letting a redirection like that get me twice!" Daisy shouted. "Especially not back-to-back!"

Good job aiming that blast towards Daisy, King Sarasa, Marissa said in her mind, smiling. *Honestly, I thought that was coming back my way if you were to reflect it at all...*

King Sarasa said nothing. He took a handful of leaps back to reestablish a triangular spread between the three. Again, Daisy found herself holding off on attacking either King Sarasa or Marissa.

Something's wrong, Daisy thought. *My dad should not be as powerful as he is now . Not only that, but I'm picking up on a faint presence different from his that feels too familiar...yet at the same time, his energy signature – aside from power – feels no different than it did just weeks ago – maybe even than it did years ago!*

Daisy always had a significant spiritual sensitivity about her, but Geno's training had raised it even higher, for she had not been able to notice the strange disparity and disturbance in her father's energy before in the same manner that she had begun to at that point. As she eyed him down, he appeared sickly to her, even ill in some ways despite not showing any signs of disease or fatigue. Daisy saw through his expression and somehow got the feeling that he wanted to cry, and that he had been wanting to cry for a long time.

Something is definitely amiss here, she thought, still looking at her father. *You're hurting, Dad. I bet you wouldn't admit it, or don't want to, or maybe you can't, but you're hurting. Something's really hurting you, but whatever it is that's doing it, it doesn't feel natural at all. It feels like it's getting more and more out of place with each passing moment...*

Chapter XLV

Mortality :

Cerberus' three heads howled to the sky and then roared at Geno and the Kruna, forcing them on the defensive. Tamara slipped out two Fire Flowers and a P-Wing from beneath his sleeves and whistled at the hellhound to get his attention. Once Cerberus looked his way, the green-clothed Sweep threw the items at the dog's central head for him to snatch out of the air with his mouth.

"Try this on for size, Kruna!" Tamara yelled down.

Cerberus leaned up into the air on his hind legs and then slammed his front legs down, creating a shockwave that echoed out in all directions through the street intersection. Geno and the Kruna collectively put up their defenses to block, but the attack pushed them back a great distance. Cerberus repeated the process, this time stomping down twice in succession and forcing the elemental wielders up into the air and on nearby decks and balconies to evade.

Neva's Alkemei Hien took on a glaring glow at the conclusion of Cerberus' technique. "This is gonna eat up nearly half of my energy, but I think this mutt needs to sit."

Neva dropped back down to ground level and tapped into her Pendant of Emulation just before landing. In doing so, she created a shockwave with the same properties and powers of Cerberus' as she stomped her feet down to land on the street. Cerberus roared in anger of his attack being copied, but he could not move around to avoid it on account of his large size. The hellhound took the hit in his legs and buckled as he got knocked on his side.

As soon as Neva's shockwave dissipated, her pendant went dull. *Looks like I can only copy a move once at a time,* she determined in thought. The rest of her teammates jumped back down to the street to join her, with Geno firing off a powerful burst of light energy in midair at the downed hellhound. The cosmic being's attack would

have struck home had Cerberus not rolled back onto his feet and batted the energy away with one of its legs.

"This doesn't make any sense," Naraka groused. "If we're fighting a senseless battle, then why fight it?"

"What are you saying?" asked Machula.

"Why are you all fighting for Marissa if you don't support her?" asked Naraka.

The three heads of Cerberus all charged energy through their mouths. The right head shot a frosty ball of ice, the left head breathed a burst of fire, and the center head shot lightning from his throat. The eight elemental wielders scattered and spread to various areas of the intersection to avoid the blasts that ended up crashing into the street. Cerberus kept releasing more bursts of power, but the Kruna made sure to dodge and block all of them. For as powerful as Cerberus had become, the Kruna were all demonstrating how much progress they themselves had made.

"I'm not going to have Cerberus rampage through here if you all don't say anything," stated Naraka.

"Well, it's not like we can just take up and leave!" snapped Maki.

"Would you if you could?" asked Naraka. "If it weren't for Marissa, would any of us be here right now doing what we're doing?"

The three Cerberus heads then gathered more power in their mouths, this time with identical purple and blue energy. As they did so, several circular portals of dark energy appeared along the ground. The next second, the portals started exploding a short distance upwards; one by one, in randomized order, and with little warning.

"Drat!" Bowser griped, rolling to the side to evade. "Everyone! Just keep moving around!"

More portals opened up in the ground as others exploded, some of their pop-up patterns actually chasing the Kruna around. Though they didn't have too much trouble moving out of the way whenever a

portal opened nearby or underneath them, Athelstan and Warra both ended up getting clipped by a couple. Neva endured a handful of unlucky portal hits, and though her Alkemei Hien glowed again for her to copy this technique, she laid off and willed the image of the attack away from her pendant. She had already used up too much energy copying the other attack, and for little apparent result.

"You know what, Naraka?" Tamara snapped, voice cracking. "You're the one that never questioned Marissa in the past, so why do you think that now, of all times, you want to start evaluating what we're doing here and if what we're doing is worth it? Why should we have to tell you that we don't want to be in the situation we're in right now? All this; this, whatever it is...it's..."

After the last of the exploding portals went off, Cerberus again rose up on his back legs and came down on his front legs to strike up a shockwave. Though Marut and Geno leapt up into the air in time, the rest of the Kruna were slow to react and got knocked back several yards away.

Tamara shook his head and raised his tone at Naraka. "Look, quit asking loaded questions – Marissa wanted the big damn dog clearing out the place, so Marissa's gonna get the big damn dog clearing out the place!"

"No!" Naraka exclaimed. "Cerberus is bound to me!" He rolled up his left sleeve to reveal glowing red markings etched all along his forearm. "Should I rescind the seal, Cerberus will get sent back to the Underworld!"

Maki gasped. "Naraka, are you serious?!"

King Boo narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't..."

A fiery, electrical aura overtook Cerberus' form as the massive hellhound focused his energy in a voracious haste that made his power extremely erratic. As a result, tendrils of lightning-laced flames shot out and curved around from Cerberus' body much in the same way as Bowser's Tavado blast. The winding columns flew in pairs and swept all throughout the available space, crashing through buildings at times as the Kruna all dodged and maneuvered their

way around them. Athelstan got a good angle and swung his spear around like a bat to deflect one of the tendrils up into the air. To deflect against a wide flame column, Bowser got in his shell and spun around, using the rotation to send the elemental tendril away and down the street the moment it flew into him.

Though Cerberus didn't score a hit on any of the Kruna, his attacks tore into much of the architecture of the immediate area. Several smoldering buildings had chunks of their structure ripped away and obliterated. Stray tendrils of electrified flames flew off farther away and ripped through the random buildings they careened into.

Cerberus roared once more, raising his energy again as an aura of frosted electricity flared around his legs. The Kruna had already started showing collective fatigue, and the hellhound looked to only be getting stronger with each passing moment.

"Get ready!" Warra shouted. "I'm sensing a lot of energy built up behind that hellhound's aura. If we're not careful, he's gonna take one of us out!"

"That's enough!" Naraka shouted, clasping his hands together. Focusing his energy, he made a succession of sixteen different hand signs, freezing the final one in place as the markings on his arms glowed and began eroding. "Begone, Cerberus! You have fulfilled your purpose, now back to your realm, for good!"

The power gathering around Cerberus dissipated as his body took on a red glow with a black light effect. The hellhound's figure became translucent and faded into the ether in just mere moments. His energy followed and before long disappeared from everyone's senses. King Boo and the Black Mages stared at Naraka as if he had lost his mind, but he stared back at each of them as sober as he could be.

Daisy, King Sarasa, and Marissa watched each other in a three-way standoff. Marissa looked to be in no hurry and appeared relaxed and comfortable, starkly contrasting with the agitated, disgruntled Sarasaland monarch. The Kruna of Earth had to act fast in defeating

the two now in front of her, but she also figured that if she wasted as much time as possible, then Marissa would be too distracted to draw from the Blood Moon and would miss her chance. With that in mind, she still felt more concerned over her dad.

Somebody who I've fought in the past had to have came here and informed my dad of my fighting style, Daisy thought. *That's the only explanation for why my dad knows what to expect from me. And guess who's not here at all right now – I don't sense Kokoro's energy signature anywhere in Castle Town... He could've talked to my dad...but I doubt it... Knowing him, he'd want to have the satisfaction of destroying me with his own hands.*

The Kruna of Earth exclusively focused on Marissa for a handful of seconds. The witch's Malocchio Eye had been open the entire time, but it had not exhibited any recent activity or effects. In no way did it seem like Marissa was exercising any influence over King Sarasa. It instead felt like there was a fourth presence there, even despite only the three of them being nearby.

Why do I keep sensing that now? Daisy mused. *I didn't notice it before, but now that I do, it's like the only thing that I'm focusing on! There's only three of us here – why do I keep sensing a fourth power?*

Marissa stared at King Sarasa, thinking of her next possible course of action. *Even though it would burn up a massive amount of energy, it would be fun to take control of his mind and force him against his daughter, but something in his psyche is actually blocking me off and preventing me from doing it anyways-*

King Sarasa threw down his Quake Breakers, jolting the ground with seismic power and bouncing both Daisy and Marissa off of their feet and a short distance into the air. When he picked his tools up, however, he went straight for Daisy without paying any mind to the demon witch. He pulled back his tools as he sped towards the Kruna of Earth to try and catch her while she had no footing.

Well, he's targeting her on his own accord, it seems, Marissa thought.

"Don't make me destroy you, young lady!" King Sarasa yelled. He twisted his torso around and swung as Daisy touched her feet down, but missed when she collapsed onto the ground. As he tried to recoil for a second swing, she propped up on her hands and whipped her leg around in a full circle to take out his feet from underneath him. Before the king even got a chance to fall down, Daisy brought a brutal elbow into his gut to launch him a short distance across the street. He nearly hit the frame of the Bellbridge gate.

The amount of force behind the latter strike caught King Sarasa by surprise, for he stood up in angered, painful shock. *Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that she would have gotten so powerful,* he thought. *How is this so?* He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. *I will not acknowledge anyone as an equal to me! I am the best!*

Daisy's golden Nova eyes furiously glared at King Sarasa. She looked focused and poised to get on the offense against him, even though Marissa looked lax and had no guard up whatsoever.

"The bond between father and daughter," cooed Marissa, suppressing a laugh as she shook her head. "It's really a special thing. I knew that bond once. But in order to gain the immortality I have now, I had to do some...things...some terrible, naughty things-"

"You have immortality?!" King Sarasa asked. "You look no older than thirty! How did you do it?! Tell me how you achieved it!"

"No, Dad!" Daisy shouted, angered even more. "You don't know what you'd be getting yourself into! You don't want to know!"

"Why don't you keep quiet?" the king shot back. "I believe I do want to know. It's my business to know."

"Yeah, 'daughter,' " Marissa said. "Your dad wants to know, so why stop him?"

"Why can't you just shut up for once, you damned witch!" snapped Daisy. "You've done quite enough already!"

Not more than a second after Daisy said that did King Sarasa rush

at her, Quake Breakers up and ready to attack. She reacted quick enough to dive and roll to the side just before the king slammed his tools down. Sparks flew up as the chainsaws struck the ground where Daisy previously stood, accompanied by the maniacal laughter of the demon witch.

Daisy propped herself up on her hands, a foot, and a knee. She was ready to say something at the laughing witch, but checked to see what her father was getting ready to do. King Sarasa straightened himself out and turned to face her and Marissa again.

For a moment, Daisy felt as if both Marissa and her dad were going to target her. Instead, King Sarasa surprised her, saying to the witch, "What's so funny?"

Marissa's laughing made an abrupt stop. Her amusement turned into an angered frown. She said nothing, and instead gave him a soul-piercing stare.

"I don't believe you," King Sarasa said, sharp and bitter. "Unless there's something I missed, there's no way you can be immortal. I've spent the latter half of my life and more trying to crack the code and synthesize the solution, but I have yet to come up with anything significant. And you think you can deceive me by saying that *you* of all people have acquired what *I* have not?"

Marissa pulled her hand up, gazing at her nails. "Well, I guess you're not as great and 'divine' as you think, huh?"

Having heard enough, King Sarasa rushed at Marissa and slashed his Quake Breakers at her. He activated their sawing action as he made contact with the witch's neck. Only then did he realize how wrong he was.

Daisy and the king both expected a gory sight; quite possibly even a decapitation. Neither of them thought they would see Marissa roll along the ground the way she did. It was as if she had been smacked by a bat instead of hacked through by a blade.

The Kruna of Earth and her father watched in silent shock as Marissa returned to standing, the witch clutching her neck where the

king had hit her. She was clearly in a great deal of pain, but she had experienced nothing more than a flesh wound. Despite grunting and grimacing, Marissa started laughing once more. The sight had only confirmed what Daisy had already known, but it made it clear to King Sarasa that the witch wasn't bluffing.

"How's that for ya, King?" Marissa said, grinning as red streaked down the hand grasping her neck. "As foolishly stubborn as ever, I see. I let you hit me just for the look on your face now."

Daisy could see it without issue. King Sarasa possessed a face of shame, of anger, of fear; but most of all, of defeat. Daisy could not have known for sure, but she was certain that the expression her dad displayed at that moment was the first time it had ever come across his face. The area under his eyes tinted blue as he trembled in place.

"I hope you both now realize how hopeless your efforts really are," said Marissa. "This is my night; now is my time to show my power. Your time has since been over, King. And you, Sarasa girl; you never had a chance."

"No..." grumbled King Sarasa. Daisy gasped, already anticipating what was going to happen next. Marissa's eyes narrowed as her grin grew broader.

"No, no, no!" the king then shouted, rushing at Marissa again. "My time will never end! I am a god compared to you!"

"Oh," Marissa said, raising an eyebrow.

King Sarasa activated his Quake Breakers as he thrust them just above Marissa's chest. Again, Marissa was launched backwards. She slammed into the wall of a nearby building, once more displaying signs of pain but absent of any legitimate injury. It didn't take long for her to get back to her feet, at which time King Sarasa's posture slumped and weakened. Daisy sighed, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

"Yeah," Marissa said, wincing. "So it's not the most perfect ability, but that's fine. Where's the fun of it all without some pain?"

"You guys really don't want to be here, do you?" asked Naraka.

"Please try to understand," said Machula. "We've been loyal to her for so long now. We knew her for so long now..."

"It's the least we could've done, you know," murmured Solovar. "After all she did for us, we didn't want to just leave without doing her one last favor."

"No matter how stubborn or foolishly crazy she has become," Tamara added. "What she has meant to us has been...pretty substantial."

Naraka sighed, then looked down at the elemental wielders on the ground regrouping and looking right back up at him. King Boo's expression had grown bitterly dark, though he kept quiet. The other Sweeps waited for a response from the black and silver-clothed Black Mage.

"I get it," Naraka murmured to his partners. "But...we've done what we could...I'd say...right?"

Though the Black Mages didn't speak, they all came to the same consensus, only needing to look at each other and their subtle gestures to know that they were all in agreement. The five Sweeps descended through the air to float back down to the ground. King Boo stayed up in the sky, hovering in silence. Geno and the Kruna all walked towards the Black Mages, though they felt no need to keep any guard up as their opponents had theirs down.

"Everything we did for Marissa, we did to make her happy," said Maki. "But we never thought that as time went on, she would only get more depressed...more angry...more psychotic, even..."

"We wanted to help her," said Machula. "For when we first met her those few hundred years ago, she looked so sad and depressed and lonely. We stood by her. You know, just like she stood by us when we were all refugees she took in. She promised a better world for us."

"Even for Gortox," said Solovar. "Though, he was always talking about how we shouldn't trust her and how he would one day take her out before she took us out."

"But he tried that many times," said Naraka. "And Marissa let him off the hook all those times before...well, except for just a few weeks ago..."

"Yet she never harmed the rest of us," said Maki. "Not on purpose, anyways..."

"In some ways, Gortox was paranoid," said Machula. "But in other ways, he was right about Marissa. None of us ever thought she would take us this far, and..."

"Continuing to work for her, with her, in spite of her..." murmured Naraka. "It's...just not working out anymore."

"And we keep saying that we'll stay and do what we can to get her back to the way she was before," said Solovar. "But..."

Tamara shook his head. "She's not happy... She hasn't been at all for a long while now."

"I know..." Geno murmured, giving a slow, hazy nod. "I know..."

"Do you guys think she could ever change back?" asked Bowser, now finding himself feeling sympathy for the demon witch.

Machula shrugged and shook his head with uncertainty. "We don't know...but, we're not going to stick around any longer... We've already stayed as long as we could and...just because she can't die doesn't mean that we can't."

"It's really killing us to see her just...continue to get worse by the day," said Naraka. "Geno, you get where we're coming from, right?"

Geno sighed, a chill filling his essence. "All too well..."

Daisy gazed ahead at King Sarasa and Marissa, intense in her gaze

yet tame in her face. King Sarasa looked utterly deflated and lost, as if he didn't know what to do with himself anymore. Marissa was licking up the blood on her hand from the small laceration in her neck as she locked her sight on Daisy.

I'm not gonna deny that the way she's looking at me while she's doing that is creepy , Daisy thought. As if she read the Kruna of Earth's mind, Marissa held her hand out in front of her to point in Daisy's direction as blood dripped from her fingers. The witch allowed her arm to drift in King Sarasa's direction, prompting a few steps backwards from the monarch.

"Why so worried, Kingy?" said Marissa, grinning in amusement. "The only thing I'm mad about right now is my blood getting on the top half of my dress. I like my whites to look as pristine as possible, but if *someone else's* blood splatters on them, then that's okay too."

"You do know that white fabric is stain release, right?" said Daisy.

Marissa whipped her head in a haphazard circle and flapped her arms in annoyance. "Daisy, just...jus-...okay? Can I just have my weird, disturbing, and maybe even somewhat lewd moment? Okay? Thank you! Gosh...I didn't ask for your sass. King, calm your brat down, why don't ya?"

"I'm twenty-two and I answer to no one," said Daisy. "Especially not him."

"You better start!" King Sarasa yelled, charging his tools. "You think you're better than me? Well you're not! You are below me! You and that witch both!"

Daisy smirked and closed her eyes as she let out a sigh. Her gesture seemed to have agitated her father, who flinched in place.

"...What?" asked King Sarasa.

"Guess what, Dad," said Daisy, opening her eyes. "I've got something that you can't do, but I can, and I'm not talking about Nova Form."

The Kruna of Earth held out a hand and focused her power through

to materialize a crystal shard standing on end in her palm. King Sarasa's eyes widened, for the advanced form of earth was an area of earth wielding that he never liked to admit having no skill with. Daisy's eyes glimmered something fierce as she stared down the king.

"I'll always be better than you," said Daisy. "Better leader, better wielder, better person."

"No..." King Sarasa grumbled, face in shock. "How can you use crystal? This is insane – no!" His features scrunched in fury as he turned to Marissa. "You! I must have immortality! You must tell me! How did you do it?!"

Daisy grasped her crystal and crushed its middle with her grip, snapping it in two. "Enough is enough, Dad! You need to change! You need to accept yourself for who you are just as you need to accept others for who they are!"

"Don't you try to reform me!" King Sarasa snapped. "I must live on! And if there is a way for me to obtain everlasting life, then I will take it, whether that means I have to go through nations or through the planet itself!"

"Why are you so driven on this?" Daisy said in a gasp.

"Because my will is law!" the king howled.

"Well..." Marissa said, playing with her hair and hat. "It's not too difficult, really. There's this certain being you'll have to seek out first-"

"I'm not going to warn you again, Father!" Daisy shouted. "You don't know what you're doing! If you don't stop and realize-"

King Sarasa grunted in hateful angst and whipped around to face his daughter. "Stand aside and BE QUIET!" He slammed both his charged Quake Breakers down, their seismic energy rumbling through the ground on its way to Daisy and ripping a fissure through the street as it traveled in her direction. Daisy leapt to one side to avoid the attack as the path of rupturing energy continued its tear

through the ground until it reached a nearby building and caused its foundation to tremble. The strike must have ripped a jagged trench a half a foot in width and nearly four meters in depth.

King Sarasa put his tools back in their holster and walked towards the witch. "Now then, you were saying?"

"It's not too tough to do, but it is pretty complicated," said Marissa, smiling.

"Oh..." murmured Daisy, staring down her dad in muted fury. "You wanna break the ground...huh? Alright then..."

Marissa immediately sensed something different from the Kruna of Earth. Her smile faded as she saw a silvery aura overtake Daisy's body. It didn't take long for a new crack to form in the ground where the Kruna of Earth stood and connect to the fissure from King Sarasa. Marissa and the king stared at Daisy, her energy flowing with more ferocity.

I don't think I've ever pushed as far as I'm about to go now, Daisy thought. *Here's hoping my body doesn't break down in the process!*

Marissa used her Malocchio Eye to get an idea of exactly how much energy Daisy had flowing about at a still growing pace. With each passing moment, the Kruna's power increased, and King Sarasa and Marissa grew more concerned and vexed as a result. King Sarasa seemed far more angry about the development, but Marissa actually had some surprise and anxiety about her. She thought back to the same display of power from Daisy at Watcher's Cape; though this time, things felt much different.

"Powers rising..." Marissa uneasily murmured, mouth hanging open. "She's pushed past before... How – wait...it's not slowing down..."

How... My own daughter has surpassed me... King Sarasa thought, flustered and more anxious than Marissa. *What does that make of me? Am I really not who I think I am? Am I really so limited?*

"You know what, Dad?" Daisy screamed as her eyes glistened through her billowing power. "I spent way too long appealing to you

as a kid! You and Mom both hindered me and pissed me off so much! This whole city pissed me off so much! Y'all just couldn't let me be me! Well, this is the end result! You never want to listen, but maybe you will when I show you what happens when you keeping stepping on the wrong person!"

"And just what do you think you're doing, Daughter?" King Sarasa shouted.

"I'm stripping away your control over this nation, *Father* !" Daisy barked. "You always talk about putting people in their place, well, I'm gonna put you in yours – underneath this entire city!"

Marissa cracked a slight smile, though she looked entirely worried. *My, my...looks like she's about ready to lose it.*

"You weak bluff!" the king yelled. "Surely you can't hope to come through with that threat!"

Daisy gave no verbal response, but pumped her arms down to flare up more power at an even faster velocity. That bolster in energy flow made Marissa wince. In just a matter of seconds, Daisy's power began creating tremors throughout the ground and air. The disturbances quickly increased in scope and magnitude, adding to the crack in the ground from King Sarasa's tools.

Donkey Kong, you better've had gotten those stragglers out of here, Daisy said in her mind.

"My lord..." King Sarasa sputtered out. "She's...she's actually doing this!"

"Daisy, what are you doing?" asked Marissa, working up a nervous sweat. "If you're not careful, you're going to crush us all! You included! Don't be a fool!"

"What's going on?" asked Warra. "Is this a..."

"An earthquake?!" Marut finished. "The ground definitely doesn't feel very steady right now!"

"No," Neva grumbled in anger. "We should have destroyed all those T-29s!"

"We did," said Bowser. "I don't think a machine is behind this at all!"

"Is this the Sarasa girl?" asked Solovar. "I don't believe it!"

"That little earth runt?" Tamara asked. "How? You'd need like five earth wielders at the very least to cause something like this! Right?"

"Don't worry," said Naraka. "This isn't going to be an issue. There's a lot of power radiating out and around and along the ground, but unless it's directed in a downwards manner deep enough into the crust, it's not going to amount to anything more than a minor earthquake at the very best. Personally, I don't think that Sarasa girl will be able to drive her power that far down. I can tell she's never tried to create an earthquake before."

"She better not exhaust all her power trying to do this," muttered Bowser. "You Black Mages just get out of here, okay? We'll deal with Marissa."

Naraka nodded, then exchanged looks with the other Black Mages. He stepped forward and shook hands with Bowser, Warra, and Geno. When he spoke, his voice cracked and became hoarse. "Whatever happens...we understand..."

"Sorry for all the trouble," said Tamara. With that, the five Black Mages turned and dashed down the street, heading out of Castle Town.

"We need to get to Daisy and Marissa right now!" exclaimed Warra.

"But what about him up there?" Andrew said, pointing at an angrily frowning King Boo hovering in the skies above.

"I take it he's still hostile..." said Ramona.

"What was your first clue?" asked Neva. "The mild rage face or his grouchy gremlin stare?"

"Hostile or not, let's hope this place doesn't go down under!"

shouted Athelstan.

"I say we just make a break for it!" Marut hollered, dashing up the street. King Boo did not hesitate in sending down a burst of darkness in front of the air wielder to cut him off and blast him back to the group. By the time Marut looked at the royal ghost, the spectre already had another burst ready and waiting.

"I don't think he's going to let us," said Bowser.

Donkey Kong rounded a corner from the northwest direction and dashed towards the Bellbridge gate. He stopped in his tracks once he saw Daisy bringing out her mass amount of seismic power and energy. A hard jolt forced him backwards a couple steps as the ground around the Kruna of Earth continued to crack and tremble.

"My Malocchio Eye didn't foresee this!" yelled Marissa. "Or maybe I just didn't look for this..."

"Daisy!" shouted King Sarasa. "You're going to destroy Castle Town if you don't stop what you're doing this instant!"

"That's all I ever got from this city – hate!" Daisy howled in direct eye contact with King Sarasa. "And I've done my best to not hate back, but you know what? I HATE YOU!"

King Sarasa gasped as if something shifted deep in his mind. Marissa noticed and gave him the stink eye, sensing something unsettling from him.

"And I don't care what happens here tonight," snarled Daisy. "If I gotta level the whole area to take you two down, then that's what I'm gonna have to do!"

Donkey Kong steadied himself and held his ground. Getting close to Daisy would be a bad idea. He wondered if being in the city at all was going to be a bad idea. The shaking and tremoring continued and escalated with each passing moment as Daisy pushed her Nova Form power to its limits and beyond. Several small, scattered pieces of ground snapped and lifted into the air, chipping into smaller bits

as they rose higher.

Then she did it. Daisy thrust her arms up and angled them as if she would throw them into the ground in just a matter of moments. Her body vibrated profusely as the build up of seismic energy tried to escape.

Oh no, she's actually about to do it! Marissa thought. *I can't let her do it! Not now! Couldn't you wait, Sarasa girl? I'm gonna have to do something to snap her out of that!*

"Daisy, no!" King Sarasa shouted. "You can't destroy my – *our* city!"

Huh?! Daisy thought, face perking up. *What did he just say?!* Our *city?!*

A shift in King Sarasa's energy then caught Daisy's attention just as it made King Sarasa spasm and stumble forward. Though he remained on his feet, he suddenly felt stunned. Marissa narrowed her eyes, not knowing what to expect but alert and focused for any sign of hostility.

But King Sarasa did nothing. Despite the rumbling ground, he kept his balance. As he stood there, something inside him ripped and tore free, at which point,an eerie voice echoed in his mind, *Your job is done.*

Daisy maintained her charge but again broke her concentration and glanced at King Sarasa, who looked to be in some sort of confused daze. She couldn't tell for sure, but something about her dad's energy signature felt different. *Dad?* she said in her mind.

"I... I don't understand..." sputtered King Sarasa. "What's going on? I can't...think..."

Then King Sarasa felt the end of Marissa's magically charged broom stab through his chest. Daisy and Donkey Kong's faces both turned blue under their eyes in shock. The Kruna of Earth completely cut off her energy flow and retracted her power back in her, putting a stop to the tremors and disturbances she had raised. The whole area then grew calm and silent, only broken by King Sarasa's weak

grunts and gasps of pain.

Marissa did not drag out her deed any longer than she needed to and pulled her broom from the king's body, leaving him without support. He fell to the ground with a thud, a hole impaled clean through him. Marissa, despite her Malocchio Eye enhancing her clarity and accuracy, felt displeased with her strike missing King Sarasa's vitals, but decided to leave it at that and replaced her broom across her back.

"Marissa!" Daisy screamed in shock. "That's not right! He was clearly distracted!"

"Oh? And how is a city-wide earthquake any better?!" snapped Marissa, frowning.

A visceral, gaseous crimson and black cloud seeped out of the hole in King Sarasa's chest and stuck close to the ground as it slithered its way towards a row of nearby buildings. The cloud avoided the light of the lampposts and kept concealed under the shadows of the night sky as it rounded the corner of the buildings and snuck away, lifting up into the sky as it did so and venturing off into the unknown.

In an instant, Daisy felt something in the atmosphere shift. Now she couldn't sense any extra fourth presence aside from Donkey Kong. But what she did see was her father lying on the ground with a mortal wound in his chest.

"You know, you did well here, King," said Marissa, looking up at Bellbridge. "This skywalk almost looks like a rainbow with all these little lights scattered about. Too bad it didn't do you a damn bit of good to protect yourselffrom me!"

Daisy and Donkey Kong dashed to King Sarasa's side. The Kruna of Earth rolled her dad over and noticed that he was still breathing, but his respiration had become very shallow. Blood streamed out of the hole in his chest at an alarming rate.

"He's not looking too good at all," Donkey Kong mumbled. "What should we do, Daisy?"

Daisy tried moving her mouth, but no words came out. All she could do was stare at her father's disgruntled face as he coughed and wheezed. Marissa marched to the Bellbridge gate. She charged some mystic energy in one of her hands and waved it at the gate to pull it open and grant access to the long path up to the great skywalk. The moon above had almost entirely taken on a dirty red-orange glow.

"What now, Sarasa girl?" Marissa said, turning to face her. "Do you try and stop me now while you have the chance? Do you try and get your ailing father to safety, or do you just leave him there and share some popcorn with me because deep down, you know that this is what you wanted to see more than anything else..."

The demon witch then smiled and let out a giggle before turning back to and entering the Bellbridge gate. She dashed up the skywalk ascent, leaving Daisy with a lot to have to consider and only so little time to act.

Chapter XLVI

Bellbridge :

"The rumbling stopped..." Ramona said. Her, Geno, and the rest of the Kruna glanced around the intersection and saw everything still and stable. Except for a handful of smoldering chunks of building crackling in the night sky, the area had grown silent.

"Then what does this mean?" Athelstan asked. "Daisy didn't make the earthquake, and her energy signature still feels as strong as ever."

"But two have faded," said Geno. "Somebody went down. Two people went down."

"That's impossible!" Bowser snapped. "I only felt one disappear!"

"Things are not always as they seem, Bowser," said Geno. "Something changed at the last second, possibly altering the outcome of tonight's efforts."

"Really?" Bowser asked, wide-eyed with surprise.

King Boo still hovered high in the sky above the street, incensed and grumbling in fury. Just moments ago, the Kruna were on the verge of falling to the monstrous Cerberus. Now Cerberus and the Sweeps were all gone, leaving him to face the eight elemental wielders done below by himself.

Andrew peered up into the sky, pointing one of his shadow blades at the floating ghost. "You're all alone, King Boo! No hellhounds, no Cerberus, and no Black Mages around to back you or Marissa up anymore!"

"Black Mages...more like, 'Soft Mages' if you ask me," King Boo shouted from above as he descended down to ground level. "Such power and potential, all gone to waste. Kinda like you, Bowser."

The royal spectre stopped just a short distance in front of the group of elemental wielders, irritated but unimpressed by their showing, due largely in part from their deflated looks. He felt well in control with no sense of danger, especially considering he knew he had yet to tap into the full power that the Mark of the Witch imbued in him.

They all look petty and tired, King Boo thought. *I could wipe them all out at once! The time for play is over.*

Neva reached for her Mushroom pouch and undid the tie. The moment King Boo saw her pull out a couple Mushrooms, he flinched and blasted a quick shadow bolt at her. Andrew stepped in front of the ice wielder and held out a hand to absorb the darkness and protect her from a hit that would've knocked the Mushrooms free had it struck home.

"Nice try," Andrew quickly said.

"Oh?" King Boo replied, smirking. Suddenly, Andrew buckled and fell to the floor. No one saw anything hit him or otherwise force him down, but he didn't get back up.

Neva dropped to her knees and frantically tried getting Andrew to wake up, but with no success. "C'mon, stupid! Get back up!" she cried. Blushing, she added, "I could've defended myself, thank you very much! That's what you get for trying to protect me!"

"Neva, for Luma's sake, do you not realize he just stepped in front of you to help?" Ramona snapped, rushing over to the ice wielder and shadow wielder. "Give him an Ultra Mushroom!"

"He's gonna need to regain consciousness first, missy!" Neva snapped back.

"What did you do to him?" Bowser yelled at King Boo.

"Well, no one told him to absorb *impure* shadow," said King Boo. "And... Huh?!"

Andrew stirred on the ground and tried pressing himself back to his feet, but when he couldn't, he flopped over on his back and motioned to Neva with his hand. She put an Ultra Mushroom in his

mouth for him to eat and helped him sit up. Unfortunately, the recovery item didn't help much, but it did enough to keep him awake.

"I expected more of an energy drain from you, shadow wielder," King Boo spat out. "If I didn't know any better, I would think that your power has somehow made a notable increase..."

"That's because we've spent the two weeks since Chai City preparing for tonight!" Bowser replied.

"Is that so?" asked King Boo. More impure shadow energy crackled around his arms. "No matter. All you did was prepare for your demise."

"Get ready, everyone!" Warra shouted.

"I've been ready, bros!" Marut hollered, flaring his Gust Boomerangs.

"I'll stay here with Shady," said Neva. "He's still not looking too good. You all better shut that ghost up!"

Geno, Bowser, Athelstan, Warra, Marut, and Ramona stepped forward. Neva helped Andrew up and moved out of the way to the side of the intersection, careful not to rush him. King Boo's expression grew excessively dark as the energy around his arms intensified. Despite still being outnumbered six to one, the royal ghost had no intentions of backing down or fleeing.

"I'll make short work of you all," said King Boo. "Rookies no more..."

Daisy sat on her knees beside King Sarasa, staring at him in numbness and shock. Her body temperature had dropped, and the nighttime autumn air actually chilled her for once. She felt her whole body constrict and tighten up as she froze there, not knowing what to say or how to act. As Donkey Kong stood beside them awaiting something some sort of verbal or physical response from the Kruna of Earth, she gave none. King Sarasa managed to force his eyes open to look at the two next to him.

"What do you think, Daisy?" asked Donkey Kong.

Daisy didn't know how to respond. She needed to make a decision fast, otherwise, blood loss would make the decision for her. She hesitated with every statement she tried to make, failing to even utter a syllable.

"I get it..." King Sarasa then said. "This...this whole thing here in Sarasaland... It's all my fault, it's all my doing. I fouled up... I deserve to die here. I'm sorry, Daisy... I...I really am..."

"Dad...?" Daisy mumbled.

"Only now, when I'm on my last gasps do I finally have a grasp on myself," said King Sarasa. "I don't know what I had going on in my mind...or what possessed me in such a manner to take me on the path that would lead to this very moment. But...I'm sad...for more than just myself..."

"Dad, what...why..." Daisy stuttered. "...Please, just stop talking..."

"I wish I could have a do-over," said the king. "This is not how things should've went. I never wanted any of this...but some part of myself kept telling me that I did, for just about as long as I can remember... I didn't want to be driven this far... This is all too much. All that has happened; it was way too much... You've had everything right all along...I just kept plunging myself and everything around me further into disarray..."

"No, Dad...no more; just stop talking. Don't – don't try to say anything. It's okay-"

"Just...just listen to your old man when I say this!" King Sarasa urged, his eyes now profusely leaking. He dug his hands into the ground, trying to resist the excessive faintness overtaking him. "Daisy, you can do whatever you want... I can't stop you no matter what you decide to do... You want to leave me here to die, then fine... I don't care... It's your decision...and I respect that... I should've respected that before... I should've...acknowledged you as my daughter back then... I should've done a lot of things that I didn't...and a lot of things I did, I shouldn't've done..." He then tried

to chuckle, adding, "Too late now...isn't it?"

Daisy gasped, mouth agape. Never in her wildest dreams did she ever imagine to see her dad the way she saw him then and there. At that moment, it all seemed to melt away – all the hate, resentment, loathing, and abhorrence built back, pent up, and raging for years – it all dissipated. Suddenly, the Kruna of Earth saw King Sarasa in a different light.

"You're a great earth wielder, Daisy," her dad then said. "You're a great athlete, a real leader, and a far better person than I could ever be... You'd really do this nation a lot of good. *Real* good... I'm proud of who you've become – I'm proud of you."

King Sarasa immediately coughed up a veritable amount of blood, resulting in a blood pressure drop that wore away his consciousness until he passed out. For the first time in her life, Daisy didn't just see some angry, arrogant man lying there, but saw in that man her father. He didn't even look as bad of a person anymore. Something in him definitely changed, but Daisy had no further time to ponder or mull over what. Then and there, though, she knew that deep down, that was really her dad speaking to her as his genuine self; and that made her unsure of who she had been talking to all those other times they had interacted before.

"DK! Get my dad to safety!" Daisy demanded. "Get him to the nearest hospital! He's taken a fairly lethal hit here – a simple recovery item's not gonna cut it!" She then looked up at the open gate to Bellbridge, her eyes glistening something fierce. "I'm going after Marissa!"

King Boo raised his arms up to erect a veil of tainted shadow around him. The energy furiously swirled and flared out a short distance from him before reversing direction and going into the ground. The shadows encircled everyone's feet except for Neva's and Andrew's and, with a magical boost from King Boo, hardened into a solidified, crystalline platform. Geno, Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Ramona, Marut, and King Boo found themselves on top of the shadow platform as it lifted them up into the air. Their ascent did not stop

until they were several dozen yards above ground level. Even though they were not up to the same height as Bellbridge, they still had a considerable drop if any of them made a bad move. The shadow platform was sizable enough in area, but still felt uncomfortably cramped.

"You all had plenty of opportunities to run and hide," King Boo said, more shadow power forming a large radiating halo over his head. "Flee for your life, cower in fear before everything you know collapses, try to grasp what little of your miserable lives you had left before a new age begins; but you ALL KEEP COMING BACK!"

A massive, eight-talon claw of darkness emerged from King Boo's halo, its sickly shell appearing to frost over and melt in an ongoing cycle. The claw proceeded to tilt down and enclose around King Boo to completely obscure his body.

"Well, now you've made it to the point of no return!" King Boo's voice echoed. "I will not hold back any longer! You will all suffocate under my UMBRA!"

The dark claw around King Boo shattered and reformed into a rotating, crackling ring attached to his underside and a pair of elongated, clawed extensions around his arms. King Boo's eyes had turned pink, and his tongue had turned blue. The bottom half of his body looked translucent to the point of being able to discern flowing purple and red energy pulsating through his figure.

"Behold – my ultimate transformation!" the spectre howled. "I am Umbra King Boo!"

"And I am unimpressed," said Bowser.

"Time to shine a little light on this darkness!" Ramona exclaimed, her broadsword glowing with golden brightness.

"Lowlife scum!" shouted King Boo. "The longer you all live, the more your presence pesters and insults that which you have no hopes of overcoming!"

"Not necessarily," said Geno. "I would watch your mouth if I were

you."

"So would I," said King Boo. He hovered a little higher off of the shadow platform and backed off of it to float outside of its perimeter, making any melee attack from anyone besides Marut impossible. The ghost then inhaled and breathed out multiple bursts of red and green shadows randomly aimed at his six opponents.

The six elemental wielders had no issue evading the quick bursts, even for those who had to dodge twice. They all looked at King Boo, somewhat disappointed and confused by the simple attack he dealt after all his boasting and powering up. But apparently, King Boo wasn't finished. When he opened his mouth again, the blasts that had soared off into the distance curved back around and headed for the Kruna once more on their way back into his mouth. The elemental wielders did not suspect anything at first, and Marut and Ramona were both already preparing attacks.

Bowser's Alkemei Kracielle helped him see the blasts incoming from behind. "Everyone! Watch your back! The blasts are coming around!"

The Kruna all turned and put up their tools to block and deflect the incoming blasts while Geno matched the ones coming at him with a burst of his own light energy. While the blasts distracted them, King Boo raised his arms up to form an element-less mass of energy overhead that grew at a surprisingly quick rate. The neon light blue ball looked solid but flowed as if it were liquid. The moment he thrust his arms down to chuck it in front of the Kruna, it looked more like a giant bowling ball as it lingered in the air and then flopped down on the ground like it had gained weight from its airtime.

The Kruna had little time to react and took the full brunt of the Concussion Ball's force when its impact reverberated outwards from the point of contact. They all nearly got blasted off of the shadow platform, much to King Boo's amusement. The powerful ghost laughed at the elemental wielders as they returned to their feet and stayed back on the defensive.

"Oh, impressed or not, you better be fearful," King Boo said. "This will be the longest night of your lives..."

Daisy dashed up the sloping and winding path to ascend to the Bellbridge Plateau, the bright colors and patterns of the skywalk's many lights making for a surreal atmosphere. The skywalk stretched out in the sky at a level only the higher points of Castle Town's tallest buildings could pass. From her vantage point, she stood at the southern portion of Bellbridge when she made it up, but she couldn't see Marissa anywhere around. Only after she saw a streak of red lightning flash up into the air from the circular terrace just below the Sarasaland Campanile's clock did she realize where Marissa had ran off to.

The maze-like layout of the Bellbridge Plateau's many lanes and roads guaranteed a less than straightforward route to the clock tower, made more difficult by the fact that most of the skywalk stayed relatively level with its other sections. Daisy figured that as long as she kept heading north in the direction of the Sarasaland Campanile, there could be multiple ways to get there. The Blood Moon overhead caused more concern than anything else.

Daisy ran as fast as she could through Bellbridge's paths, making many turns and detours based purely on gut instinct to try and get to the Sarasaland Campanile in time to disrupt Marissa. Judging by the low activity at the clock tower, she still had time; just not a lot. Another lightning streak shot up into the sky, reaching farther than the last one. As Daisy got closer, she could make out Marissa's silhouette.

Once she passed the Central Castle entrance to Bellbridge, Marissa's form appeared much more defined and animated. The witch had her arms up as if she were holding up a thick, wide piece of plywood. A faint, flowing red aura swirled around the witch's feet and circulated through her hands. Strangely, when Daisy got within just a few turns away from the Bellbridge Terrace, Marissa brought her arms down and broke her link with the Blood Moon.

After several more moments of sprinting and a couple more turns, Daisy finally stepped onto the Bellbridge Terrace across from Marissa. The light from the Sarasaland Campanile's clock cast shadows down on roughly half of the circular area, increasing the

bioluminescence of the witch's three eyes. She gave Daisy a confident little smile that her eyes made insane.

"Took you long enough to get here," said Marissa. "While you were playing Mouse and Cheese with Bellbridge, I've been forming a link to call down power from the Blood Moon."

Daisy let seismic energy flow into her left fist but made no offensive gestures or maneuvers. Even though she hadn't readied herself to attack, Marissa appeared to have stopped drawing from the Blood Moon. *I don't understand,* Daisy thought. *Why would you stop when you know that you only have so much time to work?*

"A Blood Moon is a rare occurrence indeed," said Marissa. "Would be a shame to have it come and go without reaping its merits."

"So then why did you stop drawing power from it?" asked Daisy.

"Because I know that the moment I resume the process, you're going to throw out an attack and interrupt me. Right?"

"I just might."

"Let me ask this then, Daisy," Marissa then said. "You're a great warrior; an honorable one with Nova Form mastery and substantial elemental power."

Daisy didn't say anything in response. She just let more energy flow into her fist, causing it to tremor and shake. Even with all the energy she had channeled earlier from within but didn't release, she still kept her earth power under control.

"I'm just moments away from achieving my most powerful state yet," said Marissa, her third eye making a quick glance at Daisy's charged fist. "You must be burning up inside with anticipation to see it – I just know you're simply dyingto test your new Nova Form powers against a *real* challenge!"

Daisy's face perked up. Her mouth cracked open to say something, but she didn't. The energy in her fist stabilized and calmed to half of what it was.

Marissa's voice began sounding more coy and coquettish. "Let's be honest, Daisy. You and I both want this deep down. A battle as we both are now just wouldn't have the kind of intensity you deserve. You've come such a long way. Why not cap it off with a triumphant victory instead of a so-so, forgettable win?"

"What are you saying..." Daisy murmured.

"You love a good fight, don't you? Why would you want to fight me as I am now? That new and improved Nova Form of yours; I'm hardly the threat to you that I was before. And yet, you prepared yourself to fight the threat that I was before...get it?"

"I... I don't know if I do..."

"You prepared yourself to fight a worthy opponent, and a worthy opponent you will now get when I call down power form the Blood Moon."

Daisy looked concerned and indecisive. The proposition should've been easy to turn down, but she found herself toying around with the idea in her head. To allow Marissa to draw down power would be an entirely risky and downright dangerous choice to make.

But at the same time, I'm confident that even with whatever boost she gets, I could take her down, Daisy then thought. *And I think I really want to see if she'll get as powerful as she's been leading on...*

It took a few moments, but Daisy then decided to dispel the energy in her fist. She stood in wait, her expression unchanged. Though she didn't say anything, she kept an intense gaze on Marissa.

"All I need is a few moments to gather the precious Blood Moon energies," the demon witch said, giggling. "Aren't you curious? No doubt your psyche must be teeming with desire to witness and experience the next level Marissa Arkana."

Chapter XLVII

Do or Die :

Daisy kept her fierce gaze on Marissa, still not doing anything to make an offensive on the witch. *I bet that deep down, she's scared of me,* the Kruna of Earth thought. *Because I could disrupt her power draw anytime she decides to resume it. But if she's going to do something, she better hurry up. That Blood Moon's not going to be around much longer...*

"So how about it, Daisy..." Marissa murmured. "A victory is only as good as its competition... Put your Nova powers to the test against what will be my calamity upon you all!"

"That depends," said the Kruna of Earth. "Can your body handle the stress from what you claim is supposed to be such a large uptick in power?"

Marissa chuckled. "We'll just have to see, now won't we?"

"I guess we will," said Daisy. She made no further movements and kept her energy in check.

Excellent, Marissa thought. She thrust her arms back up towards the sky as they were before and refocused on her link to the Blood Moon. The red glow around her returned to channel and siphon power into her. *Just as I expected; she's going for the bait. This victory is all but mine! Heh, heh, heh, heh...*

I'm not going to have to worry about the lack of earth up here on Bellbridge thanks to my Nova Form, Daisy said in her mind. *And now that I've mastered it, I won't waste nearly the same amount of energy it would normally take to create either earth or crystal. So I'm just going to stand here and wait for you to finish, Marissa. And then, you'll see that even when you've gave it your all, I'll still come out on top!*

Red lightning flashed all around Marissa, increasing in glow and

brightness as more power from the Blood Moon gathered and intermixed with her own. Her Malocchio Eye shined like never before and worked to modulate the growing energy in her body to keep it from overwhelming her. A wind kicked up and emanated from Marissa's body, blowing in all directions.

And when my team gets up here, our Elemental Seal will entrap you and lock you away for good, Daisy said in thought, raising her energy around her. *Then it'll all be over here, and we can get Sarasaland started in a new direction on a new and better path...*

"Multiform!" King Boo screamed, splitting into eight copies of himself. The eight Umbra King Boo's bodies pulsated back and forth from a visible state to a barely visible, transparent shell as they flew around the shadow platform. Bowser put more energy through his Alkemei Kracielle to improve the clarity of his omnidirectional vision in an attempt to keep tabs on all of the King Boos. Already, two of the King Boo clones had rammed into Athelstan and Warra. Marut got smacked across his back and stumbled off the platform, but activated his Alkemei Furaito to break his fall and fly back up in just seconds. The Kruna of Air threw out his boomerangs as he flew above the shadow platform and scored hits on the clone that just hit him and two more unseen clones nearby.

Unfortunately for the Kruna, the clones hit didn't disappear, and instead continued fazing in and out of tangibility and visibility as they flew around the shadow platform. One clone rammed into Ramona and almost knocked her over had Bowser not caught her leg and yanked her back from off the edge. Another clone punched Geno in the back with a ball of darkness, only for Geno to flip out of the hitstun and send a counter burst of light his way. Though the King Boo clone got hit, again, he didn't disappear.

Then Athelstan got lucky when he locked on to a certain King Boo copy and slammed his spear into his body. He knocked the ghost back with force sufficient enough to stun him and disrupt all the King Boo clones, therein revealing that particular clone as the real King Boo. The other King Boos disappeared without a trace, and the break in action collectively gave the Kruna time to recover and

switch into a less spread formation.

"Wretched little pests!" shrieked King Boo, flaring a dense aura of shadow. "Let's see how well you handle this!" He flew higher up above the shadow platform and shifted his body into a rotational drill-like maneuver as he aimed himself at the platform's center. He dove down with great speed and forced some of the Kruna to cut to the sides of the shadow platform to evade before he struck and pierced through its center. The shadow platform broke and crumbled to pieces and left the Kruna with a long drop back down to the street.

Marut took charge and flew down ahead of everyone else, then brought up an enormous updraft when his teammates got close by to slow their free fall. Thanks to Marut, the elemental wielders made a manageable landing and avoided a nasty, gravity-driven impact with the asphalt. Neva was still kneeling beside Andrew, who had regained consciousness and some vitality.

"That was a cheap shot!" Bowser growled at the sky, looking for King Boo. "Trying to kill us with a drop from a height like that! How low can you go?!"

King Boo reappeared not too far away, disgruntled and angered. "I can do a lot worse! So don't you think that-"

The ghost's speech made an abrupt stop when he sensed something behind him to the north. Geno and the Kruna then noticed it as well. The red, unholy light show forming up on Bellbridge in front of the Sarasaland Campanile looked disconcerting, made all the more worse from the realization that the Blood Moon hovered high in the sky.

"That doesn't look good at all!" Marut exclaimed in fear.

"That's it," said Geno. "Marissa's drawing power down from the Blood Moon. But I thought Daisy was distracting her..."

"I guess not," said King Boo. "Looks like Daisy met with a terrible fate, doesn't it?"

"Wishful thinking!" Warra snapped. "We can all sense her presence. It's alive and well, stronger than ever!"

"Yet still, how is Marissa going through with this and Daisy hasn't interrupted her yet?" Bowser wondered aloud.

What are you doing up there, Daisy? Geno thought. *Why are you not stopping her?!*

"Wow," King Boo said, grinning. "Maybe I oughta learn how to draw power from the Blood Moon myself."

"I'm worried," said Ramona. "Daisy should've been able to handle Marissa, right? At least until we caught up with her, anyways. I don't understand what's going on."

"Then I'm going to find out," Geno said, striking and holding a distinct hand sign.

A translucent sphere formed around Marissa as more power shuttled down from the moon above. On the few areas of Marissa's exposed skin – namely her head and arms – her veins began to protrude and not only engorge but throb. The displacement in the air around the witch became even more imbalanced.

"Woah!" Daisy exclaimed in awe. "For as powerful as she already is, she's actually getting even stronger!"

Marissa's amber eyes gleamed with brightness and vitality as her face strained in concentration. Her flared teeth and fangs reflected some of the illumination from the energy building up and surrounding her. She even started sweating under the stress, but her Malocchio made sure that her body didn't fail and that no power ended up lost in translation.

"Yes!" Marissa screamed. "This is the biggest boost yet! Ah, this feels so good!"

The lightning around Marissa coalesced into a loose, fluid spheroid that stretched out electrified tendrils in randomized directions. Some

of the tendrils headed straight for Daisy and then split to just inches away from either side of her, but the Kruna of Earth didn't flinch. For a moment, Daisy thought she heard Marissa's aura screaming and crying. The power around the witch now appeared to ooze more than it did flare and flow.

Just when another surge of power shot down on Marissa from the sky, a voice echoed in Daisy's head. *Daisy! Can you hear me? This is Geno! What happened? What's going on? Why is Marissa drawing down power from the Blood Moon?*

Daisy ignored the voice and kept her focus on Marissa. Geno let several moments of silence and unresponsiveness pass before attempting to talk to her again.

Daisy! Geno screamed at her. *Where are you? I know you can here me! You may not know this, but telepathic communication works both ways!*

I'm right in front of her, Daisy replied in thought to Geno. *It's quite a sight.*

Then give her everything you've got! Geno said. *If you get in a good enough shot on her, you may be able to disrupt her power flow and disperse whatever energy she has gathered so far!*

Again, Daisy gave no response to Geno. She stared at Marissa, who had absolutely no guard up whatsoever. The earth wielder looked beyond serious.

This is your window of opportunity to strike! Geno exclaimed. *The next Blood Moon won't happen for several years at the absolute least! Just give her a strong attack and knock her out of her charge!*

"Thank you for being so patient with me, sweetie!" Marissa called out at Daisy. "I promise it'll be worth your time!"

Daisy! Geno yelled. *We can all see her and her gathering power from down here at ground level! You can't afford to act slow! The process will be over before you know it, and by that point, there'll be no turning back!*

Still, Daisy paid little attention to Geno's voice reverberating through her mind. A vortex of swirling pink smoke formed underneath Marissa and spiraled outwards to glaze over much of the Bellbridge Terrace.

I'm not kidding, Daisy! Geno asserted. *Are you listening to me?!*

I hear you, Geno , Daisy finally replied.

Well then why aren't you attacking?! She's about to finish gathering power!

Marissa's Malocchio was working in overdrive. It seemed the witch herself had underestimated how much power this particular Blood Moon had to draw down. The process of trying to contain and manage all the extra energy seemed to be damaging her more than the hits she took earlier. A couple times already, her knees had buckled and her posture had hunched forward in jerky twitches.

I know we prepared with the full intention of stopping her before she reached this point, Daisy said. *But I also know that this may be the only chance I have to see what she's really capable of* .

No, Daisy! Geno demanded. *That can't matter at a time like this – not in this situation! Are you going mad?!*

... *I'm fine...* said Daisy. *I feel that this is the way it has to be. I need to face her at her best now.*

Please, Daisy, said Geno. *Attack now; while you still have the chance! This isn't some sports competition! What do you have to prove from doing this?!*

Seismic energy rumbled around Daisy's hands as something inside her snapped. "Just...just SHUT UP, GENO!" she screamed. "You didn't see what I saw!"

Geno gasped, his tone lowering to a faint level as he stuttered a few times. Daisy's mind then replayed Marissa's broom going through her dad's chest. She never remembered seeing him so vulnerable before. It was almost as if in spite of everything that went on between the two, she never expected him to die, no matter what

happened.

Before all is said and done...she will suffer , Daisy murmured.

What sense is there in waiting for her to become more powerful before carrying out that will? asked Geno. *What if you lose? What if she's too much for you to handle?!*

Marissa giggled. "And everyone thought that I was the one who'd lost it! Just who do you think you're talking to, Sarasa girl? I don't see Geno anywhere near here!"

Daisy gave no response to the witch. She just smirked and raised her arms up a bit, readying more earthly energy as she did so.

"Oh, I get it," Marissa said. "The mere sight of my awesomeness is making you crazy! Kruna going wacko with fear – a night that will go down in history indeed!"

"I beg to differ," replied Daisy. "You ought to be fearing me."

"Please," Marissa grumbled. "The only thing I need to worry about is getting dirt stuck in my teeth or your pointy Nova hair poking me in the eyes."

"And I've got nothing to worry about," said Daisy. "So c'mon and hurry it up, Marissa! You're about to find out what happens when you mess with my friends, my nation, my people, and my father!"

Marissa giggled more and then burst out into laughter at the Kruna of Earth's words. Her laughing then turned to cackling as the last of the available Blood Moon power poured down into her body. For a brief moment, a creamy crimson overtone flooded her skin.

"Oh, why..." Geno murmured to himself, trembling in place. "Daisy could've ended this; she was in prime position to stop Marissa from powering-up... But now..."

"She's not dead...is she?" asked Warra.

"No, no..." said Geno. "But then again, maybe her judgment is..."

"What are you saying?" asked Neva.

"She's standing within striking distance of Marissa and she's not doing a thing," said Geno. "Now Marissa is about to complete the Blood Moon draw..."

"How sad, Kruna," said King Boo. "You've tried so hard, only to get this far and fail."

"It's not over yet, you creep!" Andrew yelled.

"By all accounts, I'd say it is," replied King Boo. "And you're just about out of options. None of you can do a thing about it now!"

"Actually, there is one thing that can be done," Geno said, concentrating his energy. In rapid succession, he made twenty-seven distinct hand signs to erect a golden octagram around his feet. He then grounded his energy with the octagram and charged a beam of light in his hands to fire at King Boo. The burst moved too fast for King Boo to react and struck him head on, but he experienced little damage. Instead, three more octagrams appeared and trapped the ghost in what amounted to a revolving cage.

"Hey – what is this?!" King Boo shrieked. Every movement he made felt stiff and jerky. The disruption the octagrams caused forced him out of his Umbra state and back to normal. "Why can't I get out of this thing?!"

"I have bound King Boo to me with the Spellbinding Octagrams," Geno said to the Kruna. "He is now bound to my spell, but in order for this to remain that way, I must stay here. You all need to go up to Bellbridge and join Daisy against Marissa. Hurry!"

"Are you sure you'll be okay with staying here?" asked Ramona.

"Better than I'll be watching what you all will do to Marissa," said Geno. "Just go! No more questions – you don't have time!"

The seven Kruna turned and made a mad dash for the south Bellbridge entrance, leaving King Boo in Geno's hands. The ghost

had become beyond irritated, but didn't make any attempt at trying to escape his binds. In his mind, he didn't feel any urgency to break free.

"At least you're all gonna go down fighting," said King Boo.

Despite the darkness of the night, the sky overhead brightened a few shades. Glimmering sparkles popped up all throughout the sky over Castle Town, and shimmering wisps descended through the air. The red lightning and flaring energy had calmed down and became more opaque and highlighted. The link between Marissa and the Blood Moon faded as the celestial body moved on and began transitioning out of its eclipse. The demon witch stood with her back still facing away from the Sarasaland Campanile clock, her skin pulsating with dark crimson light and making her crazed grin and lusting eyes all the more menacing. Soon, that light too died down and faded.

By the time Marissa had finished, she looked no different from the way she was prior to the process, but the power radiating just off of her fingertips was no joke. The only noticeable change that could be discerned from looking at her was a slight uptick in muscle definition and vascularity, as if her body was still trying to process all the added energy and power. Independent of Marissa, the temperature in the atmosphere had dropped dramatically from the great disturbance. Daisy and Marissa could both see each others' breaths. The witch's appeared heavy and shallow compared to the Kruna of Earth's.

That's when Daisy saw it. The culmination of all that was wrong in the world stood right in front of her. What Daisy faced-off against at that moment was as close to a literal embodiment of evil as one could get. The true magnitude of the planet's wickedness and suffering was the contributor to Marissa's substantial boost in power with each passing Blood Moon since her corruption. The Blood Moon was just a means to an end; a satellite that pooled power from Earth's unholiness for Marissa to take and use herself through every prior link to it she had established. Now more than ever, Daisy realized the scope of her and her team's roles. With all that Mario,

Luigi, past Kruna, and all the other heroes throughout history have done, there still existed a copious amount of heinous evils and immoralities everywhere. Even if Daisy beat Marissa then and there that night, she'd still have a long, treacherous journey ahead of her that could stretch for years. The proof of that stood across from her, staring her down.

"And now, all of the world shall know my name," Marissa murmured. "Everlasting chaos upon all who dare to stand against me..."

Daisy said nothing. The Blood Moon had come and gone, and Marissa got all she wanted from it and more. In Daisy's mind, there was nothing left to do but one thing – fight. As she stared down the witch, her expression grew dark, but in a confident manner. Marissa stifled a laugh when she noticed how unfazed Daisy was.

"All that waiting," Daisy muttered, increasing in volume. "And for what?! I could've already beaten you by now. If this is what is supposed to be your monumental power-up, this better turn out to have been worth my time!"

Marissa raised an eyebrow, suppressing more laughter. "What? Are you actually unimpressed? I'm not a linguist or a linguine, but that past tense of yours there leads me to believe that you still must be pretty sure of yourself to think that you stand a chance against me now; let alone actually beat me *and* live to tell about it."

"Do you wanna shut up and finish this already?" Daisy sharply said, tightening her stance.

"Gladly," Marissa replied. In one ultra quick motion, she charged at Daisy, slammed a fist in her abdomen with force sufficient enough to expel all the air out of her lungs, and then spun around with a simultaneous quick draw of her broom to smack Daisy clear across the Bellbridge Terrace.

Daisy didn't even get a chance to hit the skywalk floor before Marissa had sped ahead and caught her by the arm. As fluid as her last movement, she swung the earth wielder around in an arc to make a smashing collision on the hard Plexiglas ground that had enough recoil to bounce Daisy up a short height into the air. With a

swift and violent backflip, Daisy propelled herself away from Marissa, only for the witch to be right on her as she backtracked through the air. Marissa swung her free arm forward and landed a nasty fist on Daisy's jaw, knocking the Kruna down on her side and sending her skidding all the way to the terrace railing.

The moment Daisy tried to spring back to her feet, a blast of mystic energy struck her and pulled her in back towards Marissa. The witch wound up her broom like a baseball bat and swung just as Daisy darted into striking range. Marissa thought for sure that she had Daisy set up for a lethal, bone-crushing blow, but the Kruna of Earth threw up a kick to counter and clash with the witch's Mystic Broom. As Daisy's momentum carried her behind Marissa, the witch spun around in a full circle and slammed it into her, this time without resistance.

Again, Daisy went skidding across the Bellbridge Terrace. She launched herself into the air and snapped her body like a whip to slow herself down, only to come around in time to see another golden-red burst fly at her. Though she managed to just twist her body out of the way, Marissa flew in at an angle from above and thrust both of her feet down on Daisy's torso.

The durability of Bellbridge's structural makeup was the only thing that kept Daisy from crashing through the skywalk's terrace and plummeting all the way back down to the ground below. But the give would have been preferable, for the shock that reverberated after reflecting off the terrace floor shook Daisy's skeleton. She flopped over on her stomach a handful of yards away from Marissa but snapped back to her feet in an instant to try and piece together a chunk of earth overhead as blood began to show on her. In one motion, she directed and threw the uneven mass at Marissa with vicious velocity behind its wicked curve. Although it struck the witch head on and did her harm, it wasn't enough to slow her down.

Daisy's intuition and senses alerted her to an incoming meteor-like burst of energy coming at an angle from above, but she proceeded to make an otherwise poor decision. As the great, crackling energy meteorite dropped, Daisy got in position to attack and made a successful counter through an uppercut to send it back up into the sky where it would disperse. Unfortunately for her, the maneuver left

her wide open, at which point Marissa darted in front of her and kneed her at a low point in her abdomen. The force behind the attack elicited a gut-wrenching, immobilizing sensation of pain, a reaction that Marissa took a couple steps backwards to laugh at and admire. Though Daisy's head was down and her hair blocked off any view of her face, Marissa felt certain that terror and agony took hold of the Kruna before her.

"I love it when I get to beat the living crap out of a cutie like you," Marissa taunted. "A few more of those and you won't be able to stand up straight anymore, let alone pose any sort of threat to me."

Silence followed, making Marissa feel even more like she had absolutely devastated the Kruna of Earth. But then, the witch heard laughter; laughter that broke her grin and made her uneasy and angsty. When Daisy looked up, her eyes met Marissa's, and her smirk elicited a frustrated scowl from the spellcaster.

"Please tell me that's not the best you can do," Daisy murmured.

Marissa's eyes went wide as she clenched her jaw, furious yet dumbstruck in disbelief. "What? You're not satisfied?!" she then said, her voice cracking. "You cocky little freak of nature – a death wish is the only excuse to have for such a remark! I'd watch what I say if I were you, for I have only unleashed a parcel of my full power potential!"

Daisy sighed and stood tall. "What a relief. I was just about certain that I had wasted my time on a bluff."

Marissa's blood pressure must have shot up, for veins began protruding on her head and neck again. She did not hide the level of frustration the earth wielder in front of her had incited within her. A small ring of power escaped from around her feet when she lifted herself up to hover a few inches off the ground and readied her Mystic Broom.

"A bluff?" Marissa snapped. "Well then, Sarasa girl; how's this for a bluff?!"

The demon witch swung her broom in upwards diagonal fashion, as

if trying to dig up a tennis ball from the ground. A spiky swath of raging energy sliced along the terrace floor at Daisy. Something about that energy wave made her decide against blocking or countering in favor of rolling off to the side. It proved to be a good call, for when she looked back at where she just was, she saw what appeared to be an overly spiked chainsaw blade of pure red energy running all the way out the terrace and just into the Bellbridge pathways. The very next second, the wave imploded and sent out a wide range of concussive force in all directions. While Marissa flared a telekinetic blast from her Malocchio to counter and protect herself from the incoming concussion, Daisy had to take the hit head on and got pushed up into the air.

The moment Daisy went airborne, Marissa flew up into the air above her and came down at a wicked angle with her broom pulled back to try and get an unblockable hit in on her. Daisy flipped and threw out a bicycle kick to chase Marissa away just as she got too close, then curled into a somersault to propel herself back down to the Bellbridge Terrace. Not wanting her to ground herself so quickly, Marissa zipped down in front of Daisy's trajectory to attack from below. Daisy sensed the witch's change in position and snapped out of her somersault, but she could not react in time to get out of the way of the massive burst of magical power Marissa shot at her.

Daisy put her two hands in front of her to try and catch the great blast and ended up getting forced back up into the air. As it kept pressing against her, it seemed to be growing in power the further away it got from Marissa. Daisy soon found herself propelling into the air at twice the speed upon initial contact. If she didn't do anything soon, that blast would carry her far too high into the atmosphere.

With a little extra power behind her moves, Daisy pressed against the magic blast in a manner that gave her enough time to maneuver out of its way. The recoil from the blast forced her to lean back in the air to prevent from getting clipped as it ascended through the atmosphere. She looked up and watched the burst soar up unimpeded at full speed, but in just a handful of seconds, Marissa was on top of her yet again. The witch swung her broom down in an ax swing, only for Daisy to catch it with one of her hands and

reverse the momentum to throw Marissa down.

I need to get back down to the ground! Daisy thought. *I can't just keep getting juggled like this!*

The Kruna of Earth finally had a chance to descend out of the air, but she did not even make it halfway down before Marissa appeared to cut her off again. With her broom put away across her back, Marissa charged a mass of red lightning in her right hand and took a swing with it at Daisy's chest. Upon contact, the lightning flared and expanded in a brief flash as it shocked the earth wielder and launched her down to the Bellbridge Terrace.

Just before hitting the ground, Daisy whipped around in several multidirectional spins to counteract her downwards speed so she could set her feet back down on the terrace instead of crashing onto it. As soon as she got her feet planted, she got in position for her Seismic Wave, looking to try and get Marissa on a counter attack before the witch tried zooming in at her again. Marissa flew down, but didn't get too close to Daisy. In fact, the witch saw and recognized what the Kruna of Earth was preparing and maintained an aerial position where she hovered. Daisy didn't like how far away the spellcaster was.

Marissa smiled, but sounded irritated when she spoke. "One question, my unworthy opponent – what exactly do you hope to accomplish with that short-ranged technique? You're not reaching me up here."

Daisy's expression intensified. "I can force out some more range!"

"You don't have any range to force out!" Marissa called down. "Don't you think it would be easier to get *on* the range – back *home* on the range? Where the deer and the cantaloupes play?"

"...The *cantaloupes* ?!"

"YEAH, YOU HEARD ME, DAISY! DID I STUTTER?!"

Daisy grimaced at the witch. Marissa waved her arms up in a wide arc and crossed her hands in front of her neck, palms facing

outwards. Suddenly, steam and smoke built up around the witch's body.

"...Here's something I haven't used in a long time," murmured Marissa. Fire flared around her hands, expanding into a burning half-spheroid in front of her palms. To Daisy, it looked like Marissa was going to blast a fiery beam of some sort to clash with her own wave. Both entities bolstered the power behind their charging attacks. Marissa's flames lit up the air above Castle Town, and Daisy's seismic energy rumbled along and over the seemingly earthquake-resistant structure of Bellbridge.

Wanting to land a hit and strike first, Daisy let loose her Seismic Wave. As expected, Marissa released her flaming beam to meet Daisy's attack. However, Marissa activated her Malocchio yet again to aid her and give her a boost. The half-spheroid that produced the continuous burst of flames exploded and expanded to cover Marissa like a shield. Her Malocchio kept her safe from the harm of her own fire, but also contorted the flames in an otherwise unnatural manner to accomplish and sustain her simultaneous shield and beam combination. Even if Daisy overpowered Marissa, the witch would still be kept safe.

And Daisy did overpower Marissa early on as soon as the two bursts clashed. Hot, fiery red and thumping, earthy silver fought for supremacy in front of the Sarasaland Campanile. Marissa found herself surprised with how much fight the Kruna of Earth had and with how much power she had backing her Seismic Wave. Not only did Daisy's attack eat into Marissa's stream of fire, but it actually pushed Marissa back. To show just how much she had been holding in reserve, Daisy sent an extra boost through her wave and pushed the witch back even further.

Marissa retaliated by upping the power behind her wave of flames, only for Daisy to force yet another boost into her Seismic Wave. The witch did her best to resist caving in, but it became evident that Daisy was getting impatient when Marissa felt even more resistance pushing her and her fire back. Marissa's Malocchio flashed to help her draw more power out and intensify her flames; flames that Daisy's seismic energy continued to tear apart and make wither.

Suddenly, Marissa felt the resistance against her fire drop off. Though the Seismic Wave still clashed with her flames, it didn't seem to be gaining any on her. What's more, the attack stopped pushing her back. Daisy had not so much as realized or even noticed what was going on, but Marissa did.

You're out of range, Sarasa, Marissa thought with a grin. With a massive surge of energy, she tripled the fires around her and forced herself upon the Seismic Wave like a raging bull. She ripped through half the length of the great attack before sweeping out of its track and diving down in an arc as she concentrated all her flames into one arm. With the other arm, she snatched Daisy by her neck before angling back up near her previous height.

Once she reached a height she felt sufficient enough, Marissa wound up the arm she held the flailing Nova Form warrior in and spun around in a full circle as she threw her down at an angle towards the back of the Central Castle. Daisy rocketed down out of the air like she had been shot out of a cannon, but Marissa did not just leave it at that. She sent down the fire collected around her other arm in a swirling torrent aimed square at the Kruna of Earth.

Dropping out of the sky with the Central Castle behind her and a vicious column of flames coming down in front of her, Daisy summoned as much of her power as she could. With a dense aura of seismic energy surrounding her, she put her arms up to brace against the incoming fire and trusted that her earth power would at least somewhat protect her against the collision with the Central Castle. She was in no position to do anything else but that.

The streaming fire column hit her only a second before she crashed down into the ground just in front of the Central Castle's back entrance. The massive explosion of flames and chunks of the ground and castle patio material that followed erupted up into the sky from the point of impact. Marissa didn't stop releasing her wave until all her gathered fire had flown free from her arm, but at that point, the fires spread around throughout the Central Castle backyard instead of concentrating solely on where Daisy had fallen.

Then it became uncomfortably quiet. Marissa hovered in the air, surveying her work and trying to catch her breath. Several moments

passed in which the smoldering several hundred yards down at the Central Castle backyard went on and then died out to just many scattered wisps and embers. At no point did Daisy pop up out of the ground. Marissa even zoomed in on the ground below with the Remote Viewing of her Malocchio to try and see any body or limb moving about, but she saw nothing.

"Well, that wasn't as fulfilling as I thought it would be," said Marissa, licking her lips. "But it's over nonetheless – the Sarasa girl is no more. What a bittersweet ending, you HEROIC FOOL!"

Marissa paused and waited several more moments for something to happen down behind the Central Castle. When nothing did, she sighed, a little sense of calm returning to her as she did so. "I will admit, you put up quite a fight, and you gave me quite a few scares there...but in the end, your mortal body came up short." She smiled despite the sweat beading on her forehead. "I won't say I'm gonna miss you, but I do feel pretty empty inside now..."

The demon witch descended through the air, intending to land back on the Bellbridge Terrace. Still, nothing happened down at the Central Castle backyard. Besides the decreasing number of flickering flames there, nothing moved.

Chapter XLVIII

Kruna Assault! A Divine Spell Set into Motion!:

"Woah..." Neva murmured in shock as the Kruna arrived at the southern Bellbridge gate. "Did you guys just see all that?!"

Bowser nodded. "Two great bursts of energy, then one fiery explosion behind the Central Castle; and now, nothing."

"It's over!" Warra suddenly exclaimed in a gasp. "Daisy's energy signature! I can't sense it at all! She's gone!"

"I can't sense her either!" Ramona added. "Not even a trace! And she's usually the easiest one to sense!"

Andrew's eyes were furiously wide. "Then that means that...she's dead!"

"Hey, don't say things like that!" snapped Marut. "Daisy's fine! She's always been fine! Maybe something's blocking us off from sensing her!"

"I can still sense Marissa," said Bowser. "Something terrible had to have happened for Daisy to disappear so quickly!"

"Sarasa better not be dead," muttered Neva. "No – she better not be!"

"One moment she's there, and then the next, she's not!" exclaimed Athelstan. "And if Daisy's dead, then we can't make the Elemental Seal to beat Marissa!"

Bowser roared in frustration. "What was she thinking letting Marissa get more powerful?!"

"That's the thing; she wasn't," said Warra. "We're not likely to find another earth wielder nearby on the same level as us, so we're going to need to find some kind of way to stop Marissa without an

Elemental Seal...if we can..."

"And, we don't have any time to grieve," Ramona said, sniffling and wiping her eyes. "Geno's counting on us, and he can't hold back King Boo forever!"

Neva tightened her grip on her crossbow and charged up the ascent to Bellbridge with haste, not wanting to wait around any longer. Her abrupt move baffled the others. Without question, Andrew followed her up.

"What are those two doing?" asked Warra.

"The obvious!" said Athelstan. "Marissa's bound to be hurting right about now – we can at least beat and subdue her if we hurry and get to her before she has a chance to recover!"

"We've got to try," said Ramona. "We'll do it for Daisy, right guys?"

"For so much more," said Bowser. "But especially for Daisy. She got us this far, and she would've wanted us to finish after all we've been through." He took off to run up the Bellbridge ascent, gesturing for the others to follow. "Let's go take that creep down once and for all and end this already!"

Marissa set her feet down on the Bellbridge Terrace. With Daisy out of the way, the witch could now proceed with her next order of business. She took a few moments to calm herself, for the battle with Daisy had made her mind more scrambled than usual.

"That wasted far too much of my energy," grumbled Marissa. "It should not have dragged on for that long. But what's done is done. I've got something I need to be doing right about now."

Marissa took off her large, pointy hat and snapped her fingers, then pulled from within her hat the Power Vase from before. She let go of it and let it drift into the air as she fixed her hat back on her head. The Power Vase pulsated with all its collected energy filling it to the brim. Concentrating through her Malocchio Eye, she began the divine ritual spell she had been pressing so hard to attain power for.

With each passing moment, the Power Vase drifted higher into the air. Marissa then synced a portion of her own power with that in the Power Vase as she performed a series of hand signs to create an interdimensional gateway within its opening. Her actions made a mental and spiritual link through her Malocchio with the contents of the Power Vase.

"I now activate Collected Power!" Marissa shouted. "May this mass of energy warp dimensions to bring about the great barrier!"

The Power Vase reacted, shooting a murky, dense and melded red and purple smog out of its opening. The cloudy material billowed out and made the Power Vase resemble a smokestack on overdrive.

"Bend Heaven and Hell, meld their essence, and pour from its contortion," chanted Marissa. "An indestructible, everlasting, planetary distortion..."

The Power Vase continued rising, though Marissa no longer needed to exert conscious control over her ritual spell. Now she stood there on the Bellbridge Terrace, gazing up at what she had set into motion. There was no turning back now, and she knew it. She had ushered in a pivotal shift.

"Planet Earth," murmured Marissa. "Welcome to Nirvana."

"I know you saw that, Geno," said King Boo. "What destructive power to be able to do that to your precious Nova Form warrior."

Geno said nothing. He didn't even so much as look at the trapped ghost. Geno only gave enough attention to him to keep hold on his binding spell, for he seemed intently focused towards the north at Bellbridge.

"Hope all you want," said King Boo. "It's over now, and those scraggly little Kruna of yours are gonna get run over like dogs rushing out into the street to die. The only question is, which ones will fall to Marissa, and which ones do *I* get to slaughter." His grin grew broader as he chuckled with malevolence. "Yes, I wanna make

sure I get that shadow wielder before anyone else. Don't think that you'll be able to keep me bound here for much longer."

"So long as I breathe, you are not breaking free from this spell," replied Geno. "Not until Marissa has been vanquished. And when that happens, you can say goodbye to that Mark of the Witch and the power that emblem provides. Then we'll see how strong you really are without Marissa's help; that is, before you're banished from this realm entirely."

King Boo's grin turned dark. *Yeah, you go ahead and keep thinking that,* he said in his mind. *I suppose all you can really do is remain hopeful when everything around you unravels and begins to fall apart... Just give me a few more minutes...*

"I hope you're paying attention to what's going on down there, Rosalina," said Polari as the two stood on the Comet Observatory's lookout. "We come back to the observatory just in time to see this! And now – because you didn't feel a need to send anything more than a bunch of inexperienced rookies to handle the disturbances there – that former Kruna Genesis, a legend in our archives who has since fallen, is performing something that I can only imagine to be nothing short of cataclysmic!"

Rosalina let her eyes drift to a close and did not respond. Her silence gave Polari the opportunity to pile on and explode in frantic criticism.

"You put too much faith in that young group," said Polari. "Instead of turning to veterans, you let *them* take care of things – no, you let them *attempt* to take care of things. Earth's fate will be on your hands – on all our hands, rather – because of that decision you made. I wonder if your judgment as overseer of our universe should be revisited! Not only did that Kruna of Earth nearly level a whole city out of rage, but she allowed Marissa to attain her current level of power just to get killed and make it that much more difficult to stop the witch. What's the likelihood of the Kruna defeating Marissa without the ability to trap her in an Elemental Seal?"

"You act like we had an alternative," Rosalina finally said, somewhat bitter.

"Who else but Mario and Luigi – proven warriors!" Polari snapped, flustering into an angry ramble. "Not commoners with a little extra power behind their meager, untested skills! Aside from their efforts a month ago with the elemental shrines, the track records of those Kruna are *minimal* ! That new ice wielder they've got is almost as sketchy as Bowser!"

"You don't need to worry about Bowser. He's made a great change in his perspective and outlook; you know this."

"Speaking of which, Bowser of all people – he's a more viable fire wielder than Mario?! As adept as that fiery plumber is? And let's not forget that *one thing* that koopa has been harboring in his spirit for years now; I don't care if he's made a moral change, because he still has that dangerous, tainted portion of him tuckered away that neither we nor he himself can forget about for as long as it remains inside of him! But out of all of those eight elemental wielders, I blame that Kruna of Earth! That rowdy little earth wielder! I have never known anyone of the earth black and silver to be so irrational, impulsive, and wildly fantastical-"

"When you're quite done, Polari!"

"Oh no, but I'm not quite done! Mario and Luigi both would've been smart and would have beaten Marissa the first chance they got. Instead, Daisy got far too emotional over the situation and dragged the fight out far longer than necessary. Now look what happened to her! Mario and Luigi are the best of the best that the world has to offer at this point in time, and instead, they're out on a mission with arguably less significance than what's going on in Sarasaland as we speak? How much sense does that make?"

Rosalina shook her head and gazed down at Earth again. "I'm sorry no one here foresaw any of this. Even if I wanted to, those two have got their hands full right now. If they over exert themselves, they won't be of any use to anyone. Mario and Luigi can't be the only people we depend on-"

"Well they're going to be now! Marissa's going to make short work out of those remaining Kruna, and Geno...oh, bless his soul..."

"And that's where you need to realize – the whole world does – that Mario and Luigi can't do everything. Suppose they fell in battle instead? Then what would happen? What would that mean for the planet? Before the current team of Kruna, we had a dry period in which we had none, and no one was ready to be one except for Mario and Luigi. But because Kruna must work in teams – a team of no less than one wielder from each element – and since no one else was on their level, we could not appoint six wielders of the other elements to be Kruna with Mario and Luigi. Those two have been the sole safety barrier for situations like these; and while their arsenal of powers and abilities is far-reaching and expansive, they can't be the only two people to rely on when crisis hits."

"Regardless of whether we have that Kruna team working with us, it certainly does feel like Mario and Luigi are the only two consistent and reliable elemental wielders around."

"Just trust that the current Kruna can win in Sarasaland," said Rosalina, her voice cracking. "Just a month ago, they prevented Elkon from bringing about a worldwide calamity! Have hope and faith; they're there in Sarasaland for a reason."

"Even though one of those eight is dead now?" asked Polari. "Did that happen for a reason, Grand Elder?"

Silence followed. Rosalina felt herself getting uneasy and tilted her head back. She grabbed her forehead and brushed her hair out of her face. After a long deep breath, she lifted up her other hand and covered her face. With another deep, more forceful exhale going into her palms, she parted her hands across her forehead.

"Maybe...maybe it's my fault for not wanting to do something about Marissa before," said Rosalina. "It's hard to separate the past from the present when you know and remember what they used to be..."

"...It is..." murmured Polari, slowly nodding.

Rosalina shook her head several times as if overcome with anxiety

and nearly choked when she spoke. "If I had done something about Marissa sooner, then none of this would be happening... If the Kruna end up failing, no one is at fault but myself..."

Marissa gazed up at her Power Vase as it rose higher into the atmosphere and leaked the ghastly, opaque red and purple essence into the air. *Yes...* she thought. *Everything has now changed. This world is in for quite a crippling shock...*

Strangely, Marissa then felt the need to look back in the direction where Daisy had crash landed. She didn't sense anything, but something still felt off. She stared that way for a little while and wondered if she needed to check out the impact site. *No, there's nothing down there,* she thought. *I'm not going to go and scavenge for a corpse...*

Her muse broke when a block of ice struck her in the back of the head and knocked her hat off. She turned around to see the Kruna scattered just inside of the entrance to the Bellbridge Terrace. Neva pulled one of her eyelids down and stuck out her tongue while making a throaty noise, adding a proud middle finger to her gesture.

"Ugh; and now we're doing this," grumbled Marissa. "O-kay." With a snap of her fingers, her hat floated back onto her head. "To what do I owe the displeasure of your collective presence before me?"

"Save it, witch!" Ramona yelled in distress. "Where's Daisy?!"

"Oh yes; I seem to recall her getting buried underground," said Marissa. "Yes, that is usually an earth wielder's typical home environment, isn't it? She should be feeling pretty comfortable right about now."

"I'm sorry, but my mom taught me not to have this much baloney!" replied Athelstan with a snicker.

Marissa giggled with a heinous grin. "Darn...that's too bad. Maybe you'd all like to join her then and see for yourself. I bet she could use some company down there..."

"What did you do to her?" yelled Warra, raising his axes.

"The real question is how you all got past my Sweeps and Cerberus," replied Marissa. "Not to mention King Boo. I smell something egregiously foul, and I wish I was being literal when I said that."

"You're all alone, Marissa," said Bowser. "Your Sweeps support you no longer, and Geno's got King Boo bound and trapped."

"What?!" Marissa cried. "You play. King Boo aside, I'd find it more plausible that you somehow overran my precious Sweeps than I do that they abandoned me. They have been loyal to me for far longer than you can imagine!"

"Well, no more," said Neva. "They couldn't support your cruel ways, and they couldn't stand to see you fall any more into the fiendish, sociopathic character you've become now."

Marissa frowned. "What..."

"Everything they did for you, they didn't do it because they wanted to," said Ramona. "They did it to appeal to you! And not you now – the old you! The you that they remembered from so long ago and did whatever they could for! It was because they believed so strongly that you would return to who you were that they stuck by you for as long as they did... And even now, when you may very well be beyond redemption and recovery, they still believe in the possibility that you could change..."

"But what you are now and what you are set to become was too much for them," said Bowser. "So yeah, you better believe they abandoned you! And you better believe that it's all your fault!"

"Bah – who needs them?" said Marissa. "They've served their purpose."

Neva gasped, her face turning pale and red at the same time. *What do you mean 'they served their purpose?'* she thought.

"They want to leave...well, that's on them," said Marissa. "I am a self-sufficient weapon of terror, now more than ever. Every source of

evil on the planet has contributed to my current level of power. I have achieved greatness thanks to those Black Mages, and I will continue to achieve greatness without them. I have an eternity ahead of me to do that."

"Not after tonight," said Bowser. "Because we're stopping you right here, right now."

"That's rich," said Marissa. "Do you really think you all will fare any better than Daisy did? You challenge me, you die. That simple." She turned and pointed in the direction of the Central Castle. "You see the impact site down there in that backyard? That's where she is and that's where she'll stay. I wonder why she hasn't popped up out of there yet..."

"Then...she really is dead..." murmured Warra.

Marissa! Neva hissed in her mind.

"Ah, c'mon guys!" Athelstan asserted. "She's gonna leap out of there at some point!"

"She's got to!" Neva hollered.

"What's wrong with you people?" asked Marissa. "You act like you weren't expecting it. No need to be in such denial, sheesh!" She started giggling again, but it grew into laughter in just seconds.

"Stop laughing, ya lunatic!" Neva screamed. Her tone surprised the rest of the Kruna. Except for Andrew, none of them had ever heard or saw Neva so distraught before.

"Oh, so sorry," said Marissa. "I suppose now you want to get your revengeance for your fallen friend's death. It wouldn't surprise me if you're all stubborn enough to stay here and die too – or maybe I'm totally wrong, and you guys actually *will* defeat me! Well, opportunity awaits; c'mon and take your best shot."

"Don't mind if I do!" Athelstan shouted, twirling his Avalanche Spear overhead. He didn't seem to be gathering any energy for anything. Instead, Marut took a hop forward and swiped with his ninjato to blow a gust of wind at Marissa. Though the witch had to put up her

guard, she held her ground. As soon as she lowered her arms, she saw Athelstan charging at her. The Kruna of Stone made a sweeping swing with his spear, only for Marissa to block with one of her arms. Athelstan then thrust his spear at her, but she knocked it up and out of the way with her other arm. He proceeded to initiate several more swings from different angles, getting blocked each time by Marissa's quick reflexes. On one particular swing, the witch pulsed a portion of energy through her arms and knocked Athelstan off balance on contact, then quick-drew her broom in a motion that sent out a battering wave of energy at him. Athelstan managed to stay up, though he stumbled and flustered about as he got pushed back.

"I'm sorry, but that just won't do," said Marissa, putting her broom away. "I know you're all capable of doing better than that."

Andrew dashed forward and unleashed an array of quick punches and kicks on Marissa; but each strike he threw out, she checked and blocked. Even when he ramped up the speed, Marissa still got up a defense for each swing he took. Bowser and Marut then cut across the terrace and tried to join Andrew's side, but as soon as Marissa noticed the two Kruna getting close, she caught the very next punch from Andrew and latched onto his arm. With a hard yank, she reeled him in and wrapped her arms around him from behind. Bowser and Marut put the brakes on their speed and skidded to a stop.

"Let him go, witch!" Bowser growled.

As if in response, Marissa forced Andrew's hands together behind his back and clutched his wrists. "Oh, the things I could do to you..." she murmured.

Why can't I move?! Andrew thought. The other Kruna saw Marissa's Malocchio Eye glowing.

"Now what's wrong?" asked Marissa, eerily coy in her tone. "You guys all look so sad and deflated. Didn't get a chance to recover much at all trying to rush up here, huh? I can tell by the poor show you've put on so far. Oh, don't be so down. It's a glorious night to die. The moon is shining...the Bellbridge lights are beaming like rainbows...you've got a bird's eye view over much of Castle Town... I

mean really, what more could you ask for?"

"Quit toying with us already!" snapped Neva.

"I can toy with you as long as I want," said Marissa. "And I can abuse and humiliate you in whatever gratifying way I please. Observe-"

Marissa tightened her grip for just a moment as she pulled one of her legs back. Then she let her leg whip forward to strike Andrew in the most ridiculous area and in the most absurd manner she could have done. The shock on Andrew's face told the other Kruna enough as he tumbled along the terrace ground just past Bowser and Marut.

"Oh that's just not right," mumbled Athelstan.

"Uh..." Bowser barely said. "Did she just *literally* kick your ass?"

"I... I..." Andrew stuttered, face seething red.

Marissa blew a kiss in Andrew's direction. "I've been itching to do that for a while now. Thanks for being my test dummy for that one!"

Ramona and Warra leapt to either side of Bowser and Marut and fired bursts of light and water at Marissa, but their efforts failed to elicit much more than a hop backwards that gave enough distance for the two blasts to clash with each other. From the shroud of residual light, water, and steam emerged a large, rotating Power Star. Marissa had crouched down and channeled into her Malocchio yet again as she struck a special hand sign that made the Power Star fly around like a vicious, wicked Frisbee. When it curved up and around and dove down, Ramona had to act quick to try and deflect it, but she caught it in an awkward position and couldn't do anything but hold her ground in an attempt to try and prevent from getting overrun.

The Kruna of Light couldn't hold up. The Power Star increased its rotating speed, consequently boosting its strength. Not only did it slam into Ramona and knock her across the Bellbridge Terrace, but it snapped her Light Broadsword in two right by its hilt. Ramona lay

by herself at an empty side of the terrace, dazed and nearly comatose.

Having had more than enough already, Andrew rolled back up and sprang at Marissa. Bowser and Warra both followed suit. Readying a dark orb, Andrew threw it at Marissa's feet to kick up an occluding wall of opaque black and purple. Through the wall came a Fanning Torch fireball from Bowser that blanketed Marissa in green, wide-spraying fire.

Before Warra could get off his Aquavado water cannon move, the spinning Power Star arced back around and caught him in his back. Though it stuffed the Kruna of Water down onto the ground and put him in almost the same condition as Ramona, Andrew moved over and drew his Shadow Blades in an attempt to redirect it. Bowser saw this, and at around the same time that Andrew swung both his blades as the Power Star flew within striking range, Bowser breathed a quick but potent fireball to add to his teammate's attack power.

Bowser and Andrew's combined efforts overcame the Power Star's force and batted it in Marissa's direction. With little time to react, Marissa got her arms up to try and block but still caught the Power Star head on. The witch fluttered out of the Bellbridge Terrace's circumference, but she caught herself in midair and stopped her momentum before shooting too far away. Her concentration on the Power Star broken, it soared off into the distance like a wild saucer that had lost its stability.

Before Marissa could do anything else, the winding torpedos of Bowser's Tavado rose into the sky in scattered directions and closed in on her. But while the witch kept her focus on that, she paid little attention to the lightning bolt Marut shot at her. Both attacks ended up connecting and creating a sizable explosion in the air.

"We're doing it!" said Marut. "That must have taken a huge chunk of her vitality away!"

"Anyone low on power, stay back!" barked Bowser. "We're not having anymore casualties tonight!"

Andrew backed away and ran over to Ramona. Warra had propped himself up on a hand, a knee, and a foot, though he stayed where he was. Bowser, Marut, and Athelstan readied their elemental powers for more, but while they and the other Kruna altogether had mounted a collective assault on the witch, Neva had not moved from her spot at the opposite end of the Sarasaland Campanile. The Kruna of Ice trembled in place, yet felt too paralyzed to consciously move. Whether it was out of fear or rage, no one could tell. But they knew that Marissa had not done anything to prevent Neva from fighting.

When the explosion in the sky cleared, no body could be found. Marissa reappeared in front of Bowser, Athelstan, and Marut just seconds later. The witch had several shallow wounds scattered along her arms and face and several more patches of dark red showing through the white portions of her dress. Despite that, Marissa grinned and tapped a couple fingers on her bleeding cheek. She giggled as she rubbed some of her blood into her hand.

"I commend you all for the loyalty you have for the little Sarasa girl," said Marissa. "Playing this game here to the end; now that's what I like to see! You know what they say – birds of a feather die together..." The witch couldn't help but laugh in an ever increasing manic state of mind.

It seems as if the massive power increase has put a lot more strain on her than she's leading on, Bowser thought. *She's deteriorating even more as time passes...*

She's clearly hurting, Andrew thought. *But she doesn't seem to be bothered by it...*

"Gosh, she's really creeping me out..." murmured Marut.

Marissa had the sickest grin on her face as she continued her muffled laughter. The veins underneath her skin seemed just a bit more prominent than they were earlier, and she looked like she didn't have a care in the world for anything. Her obscene and deplorable attitude angered most of the Kruna and terrified Ramona and Marut, but Neva became far more furious than any of the others.

"Why don't you just shut up, Marissa!" Neva snapped.

Hmm? Marissa thought, frowning. Both her and the Kruna noticed the sharpness in Neva's tone, but they also noticed an extra hint of harsh ferocity not normally heard through the ice wielder. Neva reached behind her back to grasp the handle of her Frost Crossbow, maintaining a deathly stare on the demon witch.

"Come now," Marissa said. "Are you really in a position to tell me to shut up? I've already slayed two Sarasas tonight, so so far, I'm the one who's been doing the shutting up."

Neva's eyes closed as she pulled out her crossbow. She grimaced and cringed as she held her tool down in front of her hips, her body now violently shaking.

"Little Miss Sassy Pants certainly didn't last long," Marissa said. "What a disappointment. To see such a proud Kruna flailing about, helpless and alone, outclassed and vulnerable. My only regret is that I didn't draw it out and make her suffer-"

"SHUT UP!" Neva screamed, her crossbow beaming with frost and ice elementals. "SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!"

Neva shot off ice arrows from her crossbow in rapid fire, forcing Marissa to put up a dome shield of flames in front of her to defend. Even with the obvious protection blocking her ice, Neva kept attacking and even increased the rate and intensity of her arrows. Though defending required more effort now, Marissa kept up her fire wall.

Then Neva got fed up and charged a magnetized burst of frost that she slashed out from the tip of her bayonet. Once the frost reached Marissa, it ripped apart and disbanded her flame shield, leaving her wide open for attack. Neva then resumed her ice arrow assault and pelted the witch with blow after blow. Trying to get herself out of the chain, Marissa flared up a swath of fire from the ground up, but not even two seconds after she did so did a swirling column of snow burst through and slam into her. Neva poured her energy out for her most powerful Novado yet, and she did everything in her power to

smother Marissa and freeze her if at all possible.

Marissa flared an aura of fire around her body and tried pressing it outwards. With furious haste, she whipped out her broom and slammed through her fire into the halted Novado blast. Her magically charged strike sent a shockwave running up through the column of energized snow, breaking the Novado into pieces and hitting Neva with a jarring recoil. Though Neva stumbled a few steps backwards, she dashed forward the same amount of steps and much more, then tossed her crossbow aside and formed a sizzling spheroid of magnetized frost and snow between her hands overhead. In just seconds, Neva had her burst ready and whipped it at the demon witch. The Kruna of Ice followed it up with a similar gathering of energy and ice that she fired off as a continuous beam.

Marissa put up arms to block with crossed wrists, but her flames dispersed the moment the spheroid hit her. "What the?!" she cried with irritation.

Then Neva's second attack hit Marissa in its full force. With a guttural echo of her shrill voice, Neva pulsed out as much energy and frost as she could feasibly manage. Little by little, her efforts pushed Marissa back and looked ready to break through her guard. The witch soon began buckling under the pressure and force of the Kruna of Ice's energized ice wave.

Unreal! Bowser thought. *From out of nowhere, this kid's just bursting with power; and without even needing her crossbow for help, at that!*

Marissa tried forcing out even more fire around her wrists and forearms in an attempt to split the incoming beam in half, but she could not keep her footing long enough. "Oh Unholy Hell!" the witch angrily hollered as she continued backtracking to prevent from succumbing to the blast.

"I HATE PEOPLE LIKE YOU!" shrieked Neva.

"You get her, Neva!" shouted Andrew. Athelstan and Marut stared at the Kruna of Ice in wonder and mystique.

"No, it's too much!" yelled Bowser. "She's gonna have nothing left

over after that!"

...Why...can't I...get this...thing...off of me?! Marissa thought. Bright white and azure waves and streaks illuminated the scene on the Bellbridge Terrace. Before long, Marissa ran out of space behind her and found herself on the brink of getting caught between a dense column of magnetic frost and the Sarasaland Campanile wall.

Neva forced even more power out, intensifying the brightness and fury of her ice. "THIS IS FOR DAISY, YOU CREEP!"

Marissa's eyes strained as the pressure on her body increased to unbearable amounts. Neva's ice blast pushed the witch back and up against the Sarasaland Campanile, threatening to compress her body between ice, concrete, and metal. Ramona regained her bearings in time to see the massive, concentrated wave of ice and frost pummel their spellcaster opponent.

Marissa's fires faltered, and she could feel her body giving way to the ice as frost formed on her arms. She was just as surprised as everyone else that Neva was overpowering her. In fact, she may have been too surprised, for she began to freak out under the stress of trying to fend off Neva's attack.

"She's...actually doing it!" exclaimed Warra.

Suddenly, an explosion occurred right where Marissa stood, blasting frost, ice, snow, and magnetic energy outwards and up in all directions. The temperature in the atmosphere dropped even more, followed by another furious outburst of ice elementals straight up into the air over the impact site. The great swath of thick white fluff that spread out and up occluded all of the Sarasaland Campanile's clock and everything around the tower's entrance from the Bellbridge Terrace. Several moments passed, at which time the ice and snow that had propelled up into the atmosphere began to drift down all over Bellbridge and Castle Town. None of the Kruna bothered to notice the snowy precipitation that had resulted, for they kept all their focus on the huge, still thick, white cloud that remained where Marissa was.

Stricken with grief, Neva collapsed on her knees to the ground,

sobbing and crying, trembling and quivering. Aside from her, the Bellbridge Terrace had grown eerily, uncomfortably silent. The drop in temperature had made the white cloud linger much longer than a similar mass normally would. It seemed like it took forever for the cloud to diminish. The Kruna all waited with baited breath as the mass of white dissipated and eroded away, hopeful that Neva had done a number on the demon witch.

Gosh, Ramona thought. *I bet writing and classrooms aren't as terrifying as being a Kruna is if this is what the job title calls for on a regular basis! I'm missing that stuff a little right about now!*

With Marissa down, I'm certain we can restrain her without issue, Bowser thought. *Then, we can see about sealing her away somewhere where she'll never escape. Geno, Rosalina, Culex, Arka Knight; I'm certain any one of them must have some special sealing spell or power equivalent to that of an Elemental Seal. They'll have to, because with Daisy gone, we can't make an Elemental Seal even if we wanted to...*

"Something doesn't feel right," Andrew then said, breaking the silence.

"I feel it too..." said Warra.

Bowser flared his teeth in a grimace, cringing at the sight of the fading white cloud. When Neva looked up and saw what Bowser saw, she closed her eyes and turned her head away. The Kruna of Ice then cried even harder than before.

The white cloud revealed Marissa, standing upright and irate. Her entire chest and both of her arms had become encased in a thick layer of ice; some of it reaching up to her neck and down to her hips. Though still alive, Marissa displayed excessive strain and pain in her expression and throughout her partially frozen body.

"Outstanding..." said Ramona. "I don't think I've ever seen an ice wielder able to do anything more to a living being than a quick-freeze..."

You mean to be telling me she's been holding back this *much power*

the whole time?! Bowser thought, looking at Neva.

"You pint-sized pissant!" Marissa grumbled at Neva.

Andrew smiled and laughed. "Having some problems there, Marissa?"

"You've been pretty *fired up* tonight, Marissa," said Athelstan. "I think you need to *cool down!* "

"Ooh, Athelstan with the *freezer burn!* " said Marut, grinning.

"Oh, you all think this is funny?" asked a smiling Marissa, her tone absurdly sharp. "You all want to make a joke out of this? Well here's a joke for you-"

Marissa's Malocchio glowed as steam began to billow up from her body. A puddle formed by her feet as water streaked down her dress. It didn't take long for a fire to erupt on top of the mass of ice around Marissa's torso and arms. With a quick pulse of flames, she weakened the ice binding her enough to snap free and shatter it to burning pieces and shards scattered around her.

"...Your faces..." Marissa finished.

"...She lit the ice on fire..." Marut sputtered out.

"Well, it was an awesome shot, Neva," murmured Athelstan. "At least we can say that..."

Neva clenched her fists as tears continued streaming down her angry, anguished face. *Daisy...I'm sorry...* she said in her mind. *I thought I could be like you...but I just didn't have enough... I'm so sorry; I really tried...*

"Furious retaliation; I'm impressed," said Marissa. She raised her hands up to eye level and flared fires around them. "I had put my flame powers on the shelf, but you all forced me to regress and bring my fire wielding back into my rotation tonight."

Bowser, Marut, and Athelstan looked to be the only three of the Kruna in able enough condition to stand against Marissa. Neva,

Warra, Andrew, and Ramona all were too drained to be able to offer any sort of significant help. In comparison, Marissa was definitely beaten up and damaged, but as far as what more the Kruna could do to her, none of them could tell.

"I found elemental wielding to be so archaic and earthbound," said Marissa, dismissing her flames and replacing them with golden mystical power. "Magic has far less bounds, and the Dark Arts are near limitless. To think that your mortal capacities have given me this much trouble thus far, well...it's beyond asinine... But in any case, your fun is over now..."

Much to the Kruna's surprise, Marissa flashed a quick flare of red mist around her body that left her with a more hardened appearance when it faded. The Kruna sensed an uptick in the witch's power, and just like that, it seemed as if all the damage they had collectively dealt her was all for not. Yet in spite of the power increase, Marissa looked to be the most unstable she had been at any point that night.

"I held back some of my power beforehand after doing away with the Sarasa girl," said Marissa. "I didn't think I would need to punish my body trying to use all this new power too soon on you scrubs; I didn't think you would all push me this far. But hey, now you'll get to experience what Daisy got to before I annihilated her." She laughed as the veins around her eyes pulsated and wiggled about. "Oh what I'm going to do to you now..."

The demon witch continued laughing at the Kruna, but soon cut herself off the moment she noticed Bellbridge shaking. A silvery light flashed up from the Central Castle backyard down below and shot up all the way past Bellbridge, followed by several large chunks of ground flying up at different heights. Marissa and Bowser, the witch using her Malocchio Eye and the Koopa King using his Alkemei Kracielle, caught sight of a speedy figure wall clinging and wall jumping along the couple dozen of masses that had launched up into the air.

"What?!" Marissa grunted, letting her mouth drift open.

After ascending along the rising rocks to a point above Bellbridge, the figure broke into a rapid, continuous somersault to land on one

of the Bellbridge paths that branched off into the terrace. Several of the rising chunks of ground reversed direction and floated back down below, though a few remained in the air and landed just inside the Bellbridge Terrace boundary. The other Kruna turned around to see what Bowser and Marissa had their attention on.

The figure marched towards the Bellbridge Terrace as sure and unwavering as ever. For as far away as the entity was, Marissa could feel the black-clothed fighter's eyes staring right into hers. Both the Kruna and the demon witch showed nothing short of surprise – albeit of differing nature – when they made out who was coming towards them.

"You're alive..." murmured Bowser, wide-eyed.

"You're...really here..." Neva said.

"I don't believe this..." said Marissa.

Daisy stepped onto the Bellbridge Terrace and proceeded to march to the front of the group. The Nova Form hair protruding out in front of and over her forehead partially masked a dense, wide wound that bled down on either side of her face. Similar marks and abrasions littered her arms and seeped into her shirt and pants. Though her bloody appearance suggested otherwise, Daisy was ready to fight again, and she made that clear when she stopped just several yards in front of Marissa and widened her stance in preparation for combat.

"It's so great to see you alive, Daisy!" exclaimed Ramona.

"Great to see you made it back up here!" added Athelstan. "Awesome comeback!"

"It's truly unprecedented," murmured Warra.

"Way to go, bro!" cheered Marut. "Now let's put that Elemental Seal thing to work on that witch and call it a day!" Marissa's eyes narrowed when she heard the Kruna of Air's statement.

"Not yet," said Bowser. "She'll resist it as she is now. We've got to weaken her more just to be sure. We may only get one shot at this,

so-"

"That can wait," said Daisy, not turning her gaze away from the witch. "She's mine. So back off. I can take care of her myself. And then we'll do the seal."

"Huh?!" Warra replied. "But Daisy-"

"What did I just say?!" snapped the Kruna of Earth.

None of Daisy's teammates uttered another word. They were all concerned for Daisy and her health, but she seemed set in her ways, and arguing with her wouldn't've accomplished anything at this point. Acknowledging Daisy's demand, the other Kruna backed away to the sides of the Bellbridge Terrace.

Daisy let a deep breath out before she gave the witch standing across from her a remark as cold as the air around them. "Thanks for the warm-up...Marissa."

"Are you kidding me?" Marissa shrieked in fury. "I killed you! I could have sworn that I did! How are you still here?!"

Chapter XLIX

Nirvana :

Snow continued to drift down over Castle Town and Bellbridge. The Kruna all stared at Daisy, who kept intense focus on the demon witch in front of her. Marissa had a muted rage about her demeanor, as if both mellowed and eccentrically irate at the same time. The witch gritted her teeth and took a deep breath that billowed wispy vapor and mist in the cold air.

"Of course; how could I not expect this?" Marissa hissed, her volume ascending. "You humans are like stink bugs! The whole lot of you fly all over the place and get into everything when nobody wants you anywhere! Especially *you!* You're the most stubborn of them all! I swatted you down and smashed you into the ground under the impression that you were dead... You could have done the sensible thing and fled from here while you had the chance – I would have never known it!"

"I've got no reason to run," said Daisy. "Especially when there's no threat."

Marissa gasped as if she had gotten pricked on her rear end when she heard that. Now the fury was really mounting within her. Her mouth and eyes quivered and twitched like crazy, but she made sure she regained her composure in just a few moments.

"You should watch your mouth, girl," said Marissa. "I would be wary about back-sassing the one in charge of this planet."

Daisy frowned. She made a little grumble in place of spoken words, unsure of what the demon witch meant.

"I have just set into motion one of the most powerful spells ever," said Marissa. "And even better? It's of my design. With my ritual spell 'Nirvana's Commencement' now in effect, a barrier of red and purple stratus clouds with special properties will take form in the sky to encompass the sweeping majority of the planet. Not only will this

barrier work to amplify the mystic powers of spellcasters and magical auras on the surface, but it will have a much larger, grander effect." She laughed with the darkest, grimmest expression Daisy had ever seen from her.

"Why isn't anything happening now?" Daisy asked. "The sky looks fine to me. Are you sure you didn't make a critical error in your prayer?"

"The barrier will take time to form in the skies above," said Marissa. "But I assure you, Nirvana's Commencement is working and can not be canceled now. The Power Vase is high in the atmosphere by now, spewing out the necessary mystic material needed for the Nirvana Barrier. For now, the skies will remain clear, but as time passes, the murky clouds will begin to form high above the ionosphere..."

Daisy's impatience showed in her voice. "And?"

"Picture a ball within a ball," said Marissa. "That's what will happen seven days from now. The barrier will rotate on a set path completely different and far more erratic from that of our planet here. As a result, sunlight will only reach each portion of the planet about once every eight days...some areas, even less than that..."

Ramona gasped. "But with no sun..."

Marissa's tone grew even darker. "That's right. Get used to seeing a blurry orange orb trying in vain to poke through the Nirvana Barrier to a planet suffocating and dying, only for the few hours of sunlight that do make it through to give rejuvenated life. Then that life will wilt and crumble again. It will be an endless...an *immortal* cycle of suffering. This planet will be under an eternal sheath of purgatory. I wonder how many people will go into a depressive, catatonic state as opposed to those who'll go batcrap crazy! Certainly with the dwindling resources, people will get...desperate...violent, even..."

"Not if we take down that barrier," said Daisy.

"We'll destroy that Power Vase before that barrier even gets a chance to take form!" exclaimed Bowser.

"The spell has been set in motion; you can't stop it," said Marissa. "Geno can't do a thing about it either. Destroying the Power Vase will only cause the building blocks of the barrier to come out all at once, and the barrier itself will still form. So long as my Malocchio Eye remains active, the Nirvana Barrier isn't going anywhere. And now that I have the Blood Moon power boost, I can now leave my Malocchio Eye active indefinitely and still have plenty of power left over to demolish you and your crew. This whole world is about to get ill...really...really ill. Sick and ill as everyone will be, I will ascend to dominance over the planet and rule for eternity..."

It became uncomfortably silent for a while. The Kruna kept quiet, but collectively seemed anxious. Daisy said nothing, though she didn't look unnerved.

"How does it feel, Sarasa girl," murmured Marissa. "How does it feel to fail?"

"Unbelievable," said Polari. Lubba had now joined him and Rosalina on the Comet Observatory's lookout.

"That's quite the event going on down there in Sarasaland now, am I right?" asked Lubba.

"It is," said Rosalina, smiling. "It looks like we're back on! Daisy has returned to action!"

"I appreciate that cheery outburst, Grand Elder," said Polari. "But with Nirvana's Commencement in effect, I would wait to celebrate. They still have to beat Marissa, and they likely only have enough energy altogether to make one attempt at an Elemental Seal. If they fail to weaken Marissa enough, then she'll resist, and the Kruna will be left helpless against her. Then, we're right back to where we were moments ago..."

Rosalina nodded. "That is very true. But I have faith in them, and faith is strong."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but this may not be the Kruna's

fight to win," said Polari. "Not today, at least. Marissa still appears to be in control. Do you really want to gamble in a situation like this?"

Rosalina closed her eyes and sighed. It was quite a somber scenario to have to consider, but it was something she would have to decide on fast before the fight down below reached a point of no return; if it had not already.

"How long are you planning on binding me here?" King Boo asked. He and Geno still remained hovering in the same spot in Castle Town's streets they had been in when the cosmic being first trapped the ghost.

"As long as necessary," said Geno. "Which won't be long once Daisy and the others take care of Marissa."

"You still believe that they'll win?" asked King Boo. "So what if Daisy survived that time? Marissa's still just too much. All they're doing is prolonging the inevitable...just like you are!"

Geno smiled. "I've seen what they can do when they're focused enough."

Tension mounted atop the Bellbridge Terrace as Daisy and Marissa faced-off. Marissa's lusting gaze mixed with her virulent grin, adding to her inconsistent mannerisms. Even so, Daisy assured herself that she would not let the witch's eccentric behavior distract her for the remainder of the fight.

"Are you sure you don't want your friends helping you out?" asked Marissa. "You look like you're in pretty poor condition."

"So? You're not looking much better," said Daisy. "It'd only be fair to make this one-on-one."

"You're mistaken if you think that we're equals," said Marissa. In a quick-draw, she slashed her Mystic Broom at Daisy to send out a cutting band of energy. Daisy didn't so much as move from her

position. She wound back her right arm and threw an uppercut when the cutter got close and sent the attack scything skyward. Marissa looked more amused than annoyed with Daisy's deflection, as if she had expected such a reaction. She then found herself on the defensive as Daisy sprang onto the offensive and leapt at her.

What followed next happened in rapid succession with no margin for error on either side. The Kruna of Earth laid down a series of powerful punches that sounded like concrete smacking asphalt every time Marissa blocked them. Each punch that Daisy threw came at a different angle from the previous one, but it seemed that Marissa's Malocchio kept her one step ahead of the earth wielder. Then Daisy sped up her rate of attack, making Marissa more uncomfortable and erratic with her blocks. Though the witch still blocked each and every one of Daisy's punches, the Kruna of Earth had been at it for longer than Marissa had expected.

On one particular Smash Punch that Daisy momentarily pulled away to charge and execute for, Marissa pulsed energy through her arms to not only block the attack but counter and knock her off balance. With an opening, Marissa thrust her hands forward to send out a red wave of sparkling energy, only for Daisy to roll to the side and evade. As she came out of her roll, Daisy pulled some of the earthy chunks she had deposited on the terrace earlier and sent them hurtling Marissa's way, but she too, cut to the side to dodge. Then out of her evasion, Marissa slashed down her hands to let loose a multi-bladed energy cutter. Daisy leapt up into the air to avoid the attack and brought her arms back and up to try and land a two-handed smash on Marissa. The witch just barely edged out of the way and took off a short distance up into the air herself to avoid the mini-shockwave that occurred when Daisy's fists hit the ground.

Marissa got the jump on Daisy and looped around in the air to make a blazing-quick nose dive directly at the earth wielder. The two ended up trying to punch each other, but instead locked fists. Not more than a half-second after contact did Marissa whip around and kick Daisy up into the air with a backflip. Just as the witch then jumped up to make a follow-up attack, Daisy cracked her body around in the air to shift her momentum and then brought her left arm back to counter. Marissa saw Daisy about to swing her arm

down in an arc to try and smash her back down, so she caught her fist and yanked her down from her height in the air. The witch expected to be able to force her down onto the ground, but instead, Daisy took advantage of the momentum and kneed Marissa in the face.

Only then did everything slow down. Marissa spun around in recoil and let her feet touch back on the ground, and Daisy made a soft landing within a second later. Daisy kept her composure, and as much as Marissa tried to do the same, the Kruna of Earth could still see frustration creeping through the witch's demeanor.

"Amazing!" said Marut. "My head's spinning just from trying to follow that!"

"And we're just watching!" said Athelstan. "Imagine what it must be like for them!"

I can't believe this, Andrew thought, grimacing. *They're both on this level, and where am I? How could I have fallen behind so much?*

Glad I never had to face-off against her, Bowser thought, looking at Daisy. *She has progressed so quickly. I remember just over a month ago when we were at The Forest Meadow that one night when Rosalina first called for us. Who knew she would've come so far! In the not too distant future, she could be double what she was back then!*

I see in you...power, Daisy, thought Ramona. *Power and will and self-assurance...things that I wish I had more faith in myself. With you on our side, I feel like we can overcome anything...*

Marissa let more energy seep out into her fingertips. *This one's a tough girl to crack...* she thought, smirking . She then let her fingers go crazy with violent contractions and movements. ... *But a mortal body can't last forever! Nova Form or not, she* will *break and crumble, while I will not falter...*

Daisy got into an offensive stance and readied herself to make another move. She was as serious as could be in the face of the wicked, heinous, unstable threat before her.

"Here's hoping he actually responds, Grand Elder," muttered Lubba.

Rosalina nodded. She brushed her hair away and touched two fingers to her forehead, focusing intently on her concentration. Polari and Lubba both kept quiet to not disturb Rosalina as she projected her mind out into space and through the cosmos. Rosalina gazed down and centered her attention on the planet down below, then searched through the immediate area around and throughout Sarasaland in search of someone specific.

Geno? Geno! Rosalina said in thought. *This is Rosalina! Can you hear me?*

No response came. Rosalina kept searching, but wondered if Geno had already heard her.

Are you there, Geno? Rosalina asked. *Please tell me you're near Bellbridge!*

Again, no response came for a while, but finally, Rosalina heard his voice. *Yes, Grand Elder. This is Geno. I'm in Castle Town, but I'm not necessarily close to Bellbridge.*

"I've got a hold of him," Rosalina said to the two Lumas without breaking concentration. *It's been a long, long time since we've spoke, Geno. Who would've thought that we'd hear from you again during a situation like this? It has truly been ages!*

"Yes, it has been a while, Grand Elder," said Geno. "I've got King Boo caught in my binding spell and am holding him here as we speak."

King Boo frowned. "Excuse me? Are you holding a conference call with that wretched woman up in space?"

"Yes, I am," said Geno. "Now be quiet. I only spoke aloud to let you know that she's a part of this now. You and Marissa might be taking a trip up there depending on what she has to say, so get

comfortable with the idea."

King Boo grumbled and hissed, but didn't respond. He did not try to break free of the binding spell either, even regarding what Geno had said. Geno decided to turn away from him and make his conversation with Rosalina more confidential.

Sorry for that disturbance, Grand Elder, Geno said in thought.

How long do you think you will be able to hold King Boo there? Rosalina asked.

Not for too long, said Geno. *I'm running out of energy. The Kruna will need to defeat Marissa quickly, or else King Boo might try and make a move in their direction.*

Oh no, that just won't do, said Rosalina. *This situation is too risky; we have to get you all out of there for now.*

Geno gasped. *Are you sure? Is that even an option at this point?*

Yes, I'm sure! We're already got a few Luma squadrons poised and ready to go and institute a fail-safe protocol for emergencies such as this.

What do you mean, 'emergencies?'

Marissa executed the ritual for Nirvana's Commencement! All those times we thought a spell like that would never work? Well, she actually pulled it off! This is going to have far-reaching, worldwide effects that we need to evacuate as many people as we can to protect them from! We've got to do that now while we still have the chance! At Marissa's current level of power, the probability of victory is just above fifty-fifty in her favor. We can't afford to have another close call like the one we just had with Daisy.

Geno took a deep breath. *So I need to go up to get the Kruna to fall back...*

And the next chance we get, we'll send someone down to come and get you all, said Rosalina. *You'll have to abandon King Boo for now, but this is only temporary. We'll get both King Boo and Marissa by*

the end of the year – that's about two months, so that should be enough time to prepare.

Understood, Rosalina, Geno said, nodding. He turned back to King Boo, ready to release his bounds from the ghost.

... *NO! Hold on!* a familiar voice echoed.

Huh? Daisy? Geno said. *Is that you? You got to me before I got to you!*

How did you even know we were talking? Rosalina asked.

My third eye reacted to you two, said Daisy. *I didn't know what it was at first, but then I felt your energy signatures and your telepathic link.*

Where are you? Geno asked.

I'm up on the Bellbridge Terrace fighting Marissa! theKruna of Earth replied. Marissa jumped overhead and threw down a magical red sphere at Daisy, but the moment she tried to bat it away, it exploded on contact. The Kruna and Marissa all thought for sure Daisy had got caught in it, as she had made direct contact with the blast. They were all thoroughly surprised to see Daisy skidding across the terrace on her feet with her guard up as if the explosion had done nothing but push her. Daisy cut around the terrace field as Marissa tried to lock on to her to throw more of the explosive orbs, causing the witch to throw out several of them without making any hit on the elusive earth wielder.

Daisy, are you really listening to us while *you're locked in combat?* Rosalina asked.

Just as Daisy got close to Marissa, the spellcaster let another explosive orb loose, only for Daisy to jump up over it on her way to her. Daisy threw out a kick, but Marissa spun around to the side on her way back down to the ground. That didn't stop Daisy though, as she immediately chained her kick into a downwards Crystal Kick off her other leg in midair to try and stomp Marissa down. Not expecting

such a quick reaction, Marissa took the hit and made a hard landing on the terrace floor. Daisy wanted to smash down what would've been a brutal punch upon landing, but Marissa rolled out of the way in time and snapped to her feet as she took off in an arc into the air again.

Geno, Rosalina; don't have anyone come down here to Sarasaland, said Daisy. Marissa rained down a multitude of smaller red blasts in Daisy's direction, but the Kruna of Earth was ready and erected her Crystal Smash in a rare, purely defensive maneuver. Even with all that went on in front of her, Daisy's focus on Geno and Rosalina didn't break. *Just keep an eye on the Power Vase in the atmosphere; that's all you have to worry about. I can beat Marissa!*

The demon witch's blasts broke through Daisy's crystalline spike walls, prompting the Kruna of Earth leap up into the air to avoid getting hit. To try and get Daisy in the air, Marissa flew over and swung at her with a quick-draw of her Mystic Broom. Fortunately, Daisy caught her with a double-leg stomp kick. With an opening to follow up on, Daisy somersaulted down to propel herself back to the terrace floor and get some more melee hits in on Marissa, only for the witch to quickly reverse momentum and respond with several swings of her broom and kicks instead. Daisy then found herself blocking and batting away Marissa's strikes rather than getting her own in.

Now you listen here, Daisy, said Geno. *You've been defiant all night! I would've thought that maybe you'd tone it down a bit after it almost got you killed, but you sound nearly the same as you did earlier! When are you going to stop being so arrogant and hard-headed?*

Marissa's string of attacks broke when Daisy made a violent, jarring counter-block on Marissa's broom and threw up a very high kick on her. Making it a combo, Daisy spun around and gave two quick, fierce jabs to Marissa's midsection and finished with an uppercut to send the witch a good distance away from her.

Even if I am being either one, Marissa's reaching a breaking point, said Daisy. *Mentally and physically. She's got to be hurting by now! This is my chance! She's as vulnerable as she's gonna be!* Seeing Marissa make a quick recovery and sprint back in her direction,

Daisy leaned back to try and counter whatever the witch had in store next.

But so are you! asserted Rosalina. *Just get out of there for now! We don't want to lose you or the others! We'll make a plan! We've already got one on standby for matters like this!*

By choice, Daisy gave no response for either Rosalina or Geno. Marissa slammed her broom down when she got close to Daisy, erecting sparkling, misty columns of red power in a straight line from the point of impact. Daisy couldn't do anything else other than dodge, for the technique attacked from underneath more than it did from the front. Marissa pointed her broom skyward as a red glow covered it, then brought it down and made a horizontal slash at Daisy. The Kruna of Earth had little difficulty jumping over the red disc that flew at her from the broom. Twirling her broom around a bit, Marissa raised it skyward again.

Daisy, please! Geno urged. *Don't ignore us! You can't expend yourself forever! You're going to stretch yourself thin!*

Listen to Geno, Daisy! exclaimed Rosalina. *You've been overexerting yourself since the elemental shrines! You're not invincible! Fall back for now! We can better prepare you eight with two months more of extra time! Maybe even less!*

Marissa slashed her broom in a more diagonal fashion this time, making evasion a bit more difficult. Instead of trying to dodge, Daisy charged some seismic energy through her hands and caught the incoming red disc between her palms. The disc pushed with great force, but Daisy held up with an equal amount of resistance.

For what? asked Daisy. *You guys know as well as I do that any sort of plan or future meeting would boil down to this anyway! Even if we did get stronger in those two months, I'm certain that Marissa would find ways to increase her own strength as well! She's already got the Nirvana Barrier working for her! Let me just face her so that we can finish her off now! It's already happening – why stop it?*

With a quick shove, Daisy slashed her hands outwards to deflect the red disc, which haphazardly fluttered up into the air and died out.

Displeased, Marissa twirled around her broom again, but replaced it across her back and began a chain of hand signs. While the witch did that, Daisy brought together earth elementals for her Crystal Fist.

We're just trying to do what's best, Daisy, said Rosalina. *We're working with you, not against you!*

"Black Magic Attack!" Marissa screamed. Holding two fingers from her right hand below her mouth, she breathed a dark, murky mist that spread out in front of her. The mist quickly shot out a black and green wall of distorted, solidified energy that Daisy punched her Crystal Fist against. Streaks of dark lightning pulsated through and around the wall as Daisy pressed her crystallized hand against the surreal technique trying to overpower her.

You guys; listen to yourselves! exclaimed Daisy. *So in your eyes, letting the world suffer under Nirvana for two months is better than ending it all now before any of it happens? We have the chance now – please, don't force us to squander it!*

The Crystal Fist and Black Magic Attack were too evenly matched and shattered with a powerful, unstable shockwave. The force from the clash recoiled against their respective fighters, knocking Daisy and Marissa back. Daisy leaned forward and put her hands down to slow herself to a halt, while Marissa projected a quick burst of power around her to stop her momentum.

Don't try talking to any of the other Kruna either! Daisy asserted. *They're all more or less going to say the same thing I'm saying. We finish what we start! That's just how we work!*

The space around the Black Magic Attack took on a strange, temporary negative effect where the area that the attack ran through had its colors warped and inverted. Whatever properties that attack had, it took a lot out of Marissa. No telling what would've happened to Daisy had she not met the Black Magic Attack with her Crystal Fist. When everything settled, Daisy could see Marissa panting heavily and clutching at her chest.

Alright, Daisy, said Rosalina, sighing. *We'll hold while you all finish.* She turned around to face Polari and Lubba.

"Well, what's going on?" asked Lubba. "What'd the rowdy redhead say?"

"We're not to do anything yet," said Rosalina. "Daisy's certain that they'll be able to defeat Marissa as everything stands now."

"Rosalina, this is ridiculous," said Polari. "We can't take that overzealous Kruna's words to mean anything! This is not rational thinking!"

"Let's at least give her the chance!" Rosalina snapped. The pressure of the whole situation felt overwhelming for her and provoked an uncharacteristic, sharp tone in her; one that she quickly tried to quiet down. "I mean...let's just give her a little while more, and if things seem to get out of hand, then we'll go through with what we had set out to do. Did you hear that, Geno?"

Yes, I heard you loud and clear, said Geno. *And I hear you loud and clear too, Daisy.*

King Boo smirked. *Whatever conversation he's having, he's clearly distracted,* he thought. *Now would be the time...*

With a great rush of energy, King Boo raised his power and pushed it outwards around him. Geno's bounds had weakened a good deal since the time he had brought them to be, but now, the cosmic being had left the opportunity wide open for King Boo. Geno didn't even get a chance to turn around before King Boo had created the explosion of shadow energy around him needed to break free from the binding spell. The shockwave King Boo emerged from batted Geno away as the snap echoed through the air.

"Whatever it is you're planning, you can forget it!" hollered King Boo. "You did well restraining me for so long, but maybe you shouldn't've let your mind wander so far!"

King Boo flew up into the air and fled from the area. As he got back

to his feet, Geno saw the ghost heading in the direction of Bellbridge. Grunting in frustration, Geno broke out into a sprint to try and chase down King Boo.

"Not good; not good at all!" grumbled Geno.

You've got trouble coming, Daisy! Geno exclaimed. *King Boo just broke free from my binding spell! If he hasn't had a change of heart, he might be heading straight for you all!*

Thanks for the warning, Geno, said Daisy. *We'll try and keep our guard up.*

Daisy glanced at the Kruna behind her on her right and put up her hands with her pinkie and index fingers. She then made a small gesture with them several times, repeatedly calling out, "Spy!" Turning to the Kruna behind her on her left, she did the same thing. "Spy! Spy! Spy!" Bowser, Warra, and Andrew all nodded and moved back towards the Bellbridge entrance of the Bellbridge Terrace. The three then directed the other Kruna to follow and gather near them.

"What was that?" Marissa asked, raising an eyebrow.

"What was what?" Daisy replied.

"What do you think?" said Marissa. "That hand signal! And yelling 'spy' over and over – what was all that for?"

"Nothing..." said Daisy. "I just want to make sure that we have as much open space as possible. I don't want them getting hurt is all."

Marissa clenched her jaw. Something seemed off about Daisy's tone. *Don't you think you're sly,* the witch thought. She switched the majority of her focus into her Malocchio Eye and looked through her Remote Viewing. It took her a few moments to scan though the area, but she saw Geno running. She tracked Geno and then looked around in front of him to see King Boo flying away. Satisfied with what she saw, Marissa left the projected vision and realigned her attention on the Kruna of Earth before her. Daisy didn't appear to have noticed that Marissa had used her Remote Viewing, for the

earth wielder seemed focused on something else.

I'm on my way over there, Genosaid to Daisy. *Hopefully I can intercept King Boo and at least slow him down so that you'll have more time to work with.*

Alright then, said Daisy. *I guess I can't waste any more time now. I'm getting hungry anyways! So this is it...*

I'll see you eight when this is all over here, said Geno. *Defeat Marissa and bring an end to this fight!*

We of the Comet Observatory wish you all the best, Daisy, said Rosalina. *We're all proud of you eight. Don't forget that.*

Daisy smiled. *Thanks, you guys. That means a lot. I intend to close this out on top!*

Now what's she smiling about? Marissa wondered. "You're looking awfully calm, Sarasa girl. I don't like it. In fact, I would advise that you don't let up or drop your guard if you know what's good for you. I am still in command here. Unless you are at peace with losing and have come to terms with dying, I suggest you get rid of that smirk and act like you're facing off against an immortal. Because, in case you have forgotten, you are. If you think my body will give out before a mortal's...well, you're more insane than I am."

"Just because you're immortal doesn't mean you're unbeatable," said Daisy.

"Fool," hissed Marissa. "I am the definition of a demigod. I am on pace to be more than even that in the coming ages; and yet you actually believe that you can win here tonight?"

"Sounds overwhelming," replied Daisy. "But I've actually been looking forward to this opportunity. A challenge is meant to be met, and this is my greatest challenge yet!" She pulsed out a little seismic energy and got into stance, ready to attack and continue the battle. Her smile looked as pure as could be.

"Heh... What an absolute treat," Marissa murmured, grinning and getting into position herself. "The rush of the hunt! The thrill of the

kill! It's always so fulfilling, but I'd forgotten how exhilarating it can be to go against a fighter of such a rare breed!"

Yeah, this has been pretty awesome, but this won't go on forever, Daisy thought. *She's weakening. She's trying to mask it, but she's definitely slowing down. But so am I, so I need to be perfect from here on out! This is the final stretch!*

Chapter L - FINAL

Eternal Sarasaland :

The snow had slowed its rate of precipitation down to flurries as a cascading green, blue, and purple aurora appeared all throughout the nighttime sky. The Bellbridge lights looked even more brilliant with the lights from above and with the scattered sheen of snow reflecting their luminescence. The night had taken on a dainty, elegant surrealism as Daisy and Marissa faced each other in a standoff. With the combined brilliance from the full moon and auroras above, the many rainbow lights of Bellbridge, the light from the Sarasaland Campanile's huge clock, and the thin, reflective layer of snow, the night had become unusually bright.

"Just look at Daisy," said Ramona. "How can she be so relaxed right now?"

"I wouldn't say relaxed," stated Bowser. "Calm and stable, yes. Definitely the exact opposite of Marissa."

"You know, it's kinda funny," said Andrew. "Marissa looked so cutesy and harmless before – even though we all knew that really wasn't the case – but now, she looks absolutely deranged."

"Yeah," said Ramona. "She was like some dark fairy, but now, she's starting to look like a demented monster!"

"She looks really mean!" exclaimed Marut. "And she's really popping some veins!"

"I'm not surprised," muttered Neva. "She's just showing the freaky psycho that she really is deep down inside..."

"Well, what do ya expect from a demon witch?" said Athelstan. "We were bound to see it sooner or later."

Marissa grimaced as her three eyes gave off a haunting shine, though it could also be said that she was grinning as well. Her

fingers kept fidgeting and moving in the most bizarre, uncouth manner. The strain on her body had become more than evident – it was obvious.

Warra looked on at the Kruna of Earth and the demon witch. *Be careful, Daisy...* he said in thought.

Damn it all, thought Marissa. *If I had just had a few days to let my body adjust to this influx of power, I could've handled this without issue, and these pathetic fools would be history. I didn't think I would draw as much power through the Blood Moon as I did, but I guess that's a sign of how far the world has fallen.*

"...It's over," Daisy then proudly said. There was a serious sense of intensity in her tone that irked Marissa. "It all ends here."

"Who are you to declare such things, Sarasa girl?" asked Marissa. No longer was her voice as suave and playful as it had been before. Now, a certain grainy hoarseness had mixed in to her tone. "You last this long, and all of a sudden, you think you're in the clear."

Daisy chuckled a little before pulling back to get in position to ready her Seismic Wave. A silvery aura of seismic energy full of luster flared around Daisy and rotated counter-clockwise from her feet to up above her head. Her energy rumbled outwards from around her legs and thickened into a smooth, swirling cone-vortex. The Kruna noticed something different about this particular Seismic Wave, as glittering sparkles and glimmering streaks mixed in to Daisy's silver mist.

"What a night..." murmured Ramona.

Now look at her, Marissa thought. *She's challenging me to match her attack. No doubt this one looks much different from the one before...*

Daisy stared at the demon witch with nothing but seriousness now as she concentrated and focused more power through her stance. At no point did the Kruna of Earth appear pressed to release her technique. It almost seemed like Daisy hit a plateau and just held her energy there, waiting for a reaction before doing anything further

herself.

"Now what is she doing?!" cried Polari. "She's wasting time like that! Rosalina! Tell her to hurry up and close things out!"

Rosalina kept her focus on Sarasaland. A handful of other Lumas had made their way to the Comet Observatory lookout to see what all the fuss was about and had directed their attention down to Earth as well. Lubba smiled, though it looked like he was trying hard to.

"This is not what I had in mind when we decided to let Daisy finish the battle against Marissa!" Polari exclaimed. "The more time this takes, the more of a chance Marissa'll come up with a way to beat them! Don't you get it? The longer Daisy lets the fight drag on, the more likely it'll be for either Marissa or King Boo to pull a critical reversal! King Boo's getting the best of Geno right now! Geno can't slow that ghost down anymore than he's slowing him down as we speak! And that's not much!"

"I can't do anything," said Rosalina. "She won't listen. Daisy won't listen."

Polari quivered and trembled. "Oh...why does it have to be like this..."

"Why ask why, Polari?" asked Lubba. "Why is the sky on Earth blue? Why do mammals have toes on their feet? Why do cheerleaders cheer, but a ringleader doesn't ring? Why is Waluigi so damn skinny, but somehow as heavy as Donkey Kong? There are some things we just can't find the answers to! Believe me; I'm doing my best to try and stay optimistic, but I understand how you feel."

"Grand Elder," said a yellow Luma. "I hope the Kruna win. I don't wanna see what would happen to the Earth if that nasty witch beat them."

Rosalina's expression looked intensely anxious. She had worked up a mad nervous sweat from watching everything in Sarasaland. *Please, Daisy,* Rosalina said in thought. *Hurry up... You don't have*

all night!

Daisy still stood with her Seismic Wave ready to fire, but didn't do anything. Her energy continued to swirl around her, and though she could release it the very next moment, she felt compelled to hold it. The Kruna didn't have a clue as to what Daisy had in mind, but the earth wielder looked confident enough for them to know that it was all intentional.

"What's the deal, Sarasa girl?" Marissa hissed. "Why are you just standing there?"

"Why are you just standing there?" replied Daisy. "Shouldn't you be worried about getting overrun by my attack?"

"Huh?!" cried Marissa, a sharp twitch jolting through her face. "Have you been condensing power this whole time?!"

"That's a good question..." said Daisy. A few moments passed, but she added nothing.

Marissa scowled, taking a step back but then stepping forward and grunting with animosity. Within seconds though, she cooled herself down and grinned at Daisy again when she looked back at the earth wielder. "Oh, I get it," said the witch. "You can't charge any more because that's all the energy you have left!"

"...Let's find out," replied Daisy.

"What? How dare you!" screamed Marissa. "You are in no position to toy with me!"

The amount of times Marissa's voice cracked in her previous statement made Marut, Ramona, and Neva all shudder. Again, Daisy stood there with no response, maintaining her Seismic Wave charge and what had become an eerily muted death stare. A couple moments later, the Kruna of Earth pulsed a quick burst of energy out and tightened her stance. To Marissa, Daisy almost seemed *too* focused.

Oh yes, I can see it now, thought Marissa. *You're charged and ready to fire, but you don't wanna waste your shot...*

The demon witch grinned and let a loose, stratified aura of red flow up from around her legs. Paired with her manic appearance, not a person or thing in any of the Kruna's minds or memories looked more hellish, twisted, demonic, and downright creepy than Marissa did at that very moment. It was then that the seven Kruna watching Daisy and Marissa all had the same freezing chill shoot through them. They assumed that Daisy likely had to have felt it to, but she had displayed no recoil and stayed put right where she was.

Clearly, she didn't think this through, Marissa said in her mind, giggling. *In trying to make sure she wouldn't miss, she set herself up way too close to me to leave herself wide open like that!* She held her right hand up near her head and flared a red-pink-black orb of energy. As it hovered over her palm, blade-like lightning ran through the perfect sphere, and her Malocchio Eye glowed in tandem with it.

Daisy quickly glanced up at the oversized ball and its lightning before looking back at Marissa, whose many protruding veins thickened and darkened. Marissa's giggling slowly turned into demented cackling as her energy orb expanded. The orb doubled in size twice in rapid succession. She had to raise her arm over her head to allow the ball to expand even more. Again, the orb experienced a large influx of power, becoming almost twice the size of Bowser. Her hat casting a shadow over her face, she put up a unique hand sign not seen before with her left hand.

"I call this one the Orb of Mortal Decay," murmured Marissa. "Or, for the basic teenage idiots of the world, the OMD!"

"I don't like the look of that spooky thing," mumbled Marut. "And why do I hear moaning coming from it?"

"The souls of the departed shall take care of this particular earth wielder," said Marissa. "Just try and fend off their hunger, Sarasa girl!"

"Hunger?!" asked Warra.

Marissa's laughter echoed when she chucked her ball. Strangely enough, Daisy broke out of her Seismic Wave stance in utter surprise and pulled her energy back inside of her. She then wound up and swung a hook to deflect the incoming Orb of Mortal Decay on impulse, but just a mere second after contact, the ball exploded over Daisy and flared up into the air above where she stood. From the outside looking in, one moment Daisy was there, and then the next, she had been consumed by the searing orb. Though the explosion was small, its thick smog lingered for a while and obscured a large portion of the Bellbridge Terrace.

"There, now you're dead for sure!" Marissa declared. "This is where magic shines over any and all of the eight elements. I have unleashed upon the Sarasa girl a burn far more deadly than the average fire by channeling into the eternal famine of lost souls. Just one of the many perks of the Arkana bloodline and Malocchio Eye combo! Not only is her life force consumed, but so is her mortal form..." She chuckled a little before adding. "Or maybe just part of her mortal form, leaving just enough for her to live for a little while in agony as a partially decayed corpse..."

"C'mon man! That sounds so broken!" exclaimed Marut.

"Just like nearly every ability considered immoral by your society," replied Marissa. "You guys banned all the cool stuff! Why would you even prohibit such awesome powers? Why deny yourselves such impressive techniques?"

"Because of people like you who'd abuse them!" said Bowser.

"And look what's happened as a result," said Marissa. "Maybe the Sarasa girl could've had a proper defense without castrating herself worrying about what's moral and immoral. Honestly, for society to prohibit and restrict the usage, learning, and teaching of so many staggering abilities and techniques – some of which peons like you can't even fathom – is beyond laughable-"

"Look alive, Marissa!" shouted Daisy. "If I were a Thwomp, I would've crushed you by now."

"What?! No!" Marissa cried, turning her head. "How?! How could you

dodge at THIS RANGE?!"

When the occlusive explosion settled, Daisy stood a good distance away from where she was when she hit the Orb of Mortal Decay. She looked virtually no different from when she did before Marissa had thrown her attack.

"How did she do that..." murmured Marut. "It's crazy... That has got to be the best luck ever..."

"I would have to say that that's the most clutch thing she's done all night!" exclaimed Athelstan. "She dodged it all somehow," said Bowser. "It's fast. It's hard to imagine. She's *really* pushing herself..."

"But she needs to remember that she's wearing down faster than Marissa is," Warra added.

"Even so, it feels like that Orb of Mortal Decay took a large shot at Marissa's power," murmured Ramona. "Her energy signature has dropped off quite a lot."

"I bet she won't try that attack again," said Neva.

"It seemed odd that for my continuous attack, you chose to counter with a single burst," Daisy said to Marissa. "I merely hit it and backtracked away and to the side right after contact. It's a good thing I did. That's some pretty nasty stuff you let loose-"

"Things you say when someone walks out the bathroom – HO!" Marut hastily shouted, slapping fives with Athelstan and Neva.

"I can do without the commentary from the peanut gallery!" snapped Marissa. "I am still in control here! I have been in control here this whole night!"

"Are you sure about that, Marissa?" asked Daisy. "It sure would suck if you lost it and got beat at the last minute..." She cracked a smile. "By a mere mortal. A human, at that..."

"Yes, well..." Marissa said, giggling as sweat ran down her protruding veins. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it..."

A short, uncomfortable pause followed. Daisy kept smiling, feeling no need to reply. Marissa smiled for a few moments too, but then frowned and flared her teeth with a furious grunt. "...THAT IS IF WE EVER GET TO IT, FO-OL!" the witch screamed.

Right away, Marissa hopped in the air and flew at Daisy head-on. In rapid succession, Marissa kneed Daisy in the abdomen – not once, but twice – punched her in the face, twirled around to kick her in the back, and rushed at her when she stumbled to ram an elbow into her back as well. Daisy staggered ahead and regained her bearings just as Marissa leapt at her again, but swiftly dodged the handful of punches and kicks the witch threw.

Then, on a block, Daisy pushed Marissa off balance and returned the favor with a combo of her own. The hook, spin kick, and Flurry Punch the Kruna of Earth unleashed all connected with Marissa and stunned her long enough for Daisy to grab hold of her and slam her down in a double somersault suplex. But when Daisy shot back to her feet and sprang away, Marissa laughed and flipped back to standing herself. The spellcaster's amusement made Ramona, Neva, and Marut shudder again and turn pale. Bowser, Andrew, Athelstan, and Warra all looked at Marissa like they were expecting the witch to turn into a hundred snakes and fly in all directions. Daisy's expression increased in intensity as she stared at Marissa, who had begun licking blood off her fingers – likely both of their blood.

"This witch is unbelievable..." Warra murmured, somber and rattled.

"Superb, Daisy; really!" Marissa hollered, clenching her raised fist and grinning. "You're beyond proficient. You're magnificent. Stunning... But I am still better. I am Lord Arkana – Lord of the Arkana demon bloodline. I go on and on...but you are finite. I remain untouched compared to you, but it's a true wonder how you're still even standing. I am on a divine level that you can't hope to comprehend. You, them, everyone; you all crumble and decay, wither and die. But *I* ...I live on. You don't understand the gauntlet that I've gone through to transcend the mortal body. I have torn myself apart to rebuild into the most powerful being in existence! Nothing can stop me, get it? I go on and on, and eons later, I will remain, as youthful and as powerful as ever."

"...I just want this nightmare to be over," murmured Ramona, twiddling her fingers.

The Kruna had grown more anxious and tense than ever as they watched Daisy and Marissa face-off. Bowser and Athelstan could not take their eyes away from the two. Andrew and Neva had their hands tightened and were ready to leap into action the instant something went horribly wrong. Warra had got down on one knee in an attempt to steady and calm himself. Marut could feel his heart beating in his neck.

"Tell me, Sarasa," said Marissa. "How you can stand there without a care in the world knowing you are facing the very definition of 'limitless?' "

"For a limitless person, you're looking more strained by the minute," said Daisy. "Do you even have any power left?"

"Of course I still do!" snapped Marissa. "I've got all the power I need!"

"Maybe we should just stop and let you rest up," said Daisy. "Then we can try again in a couple days. I think you're too worn out."

Shock came over Marissa and made her dumbstruck. "What...I...uh...ahhh...?"

Daisy said nothing and stared at the witch, waiting for a response. Marissa gritted her teeth as her face furiously constricted and twitched. "Don't you patronize me!" screamed Marissa. "I am in a league above you and your kind!"

Flaring her crimson red energy around her body, Marissa charged at Daisy again and attacked with more ferocity and wildness than anyone had ever seen before from her. Punches and kicks flew from Marissa's arms and legs, and though Daisy blocked them all at first, it took every ounce of speed in her to be able to keep up with the witch.

"I did not spend centuries as an immortal just to get beaten in my most powerful state ever!" cried Marissa as she dealt out her blows.

"You will not do this to me! You can NOT beat me! You're nothing but an imperfect, fatally flawed mortal!"

Marissa's attacks then broke through Daisy's blocks and hit her one after another. After a little more than a dozen strikes connected, Marissa made a quick draw with her broom to bat Daisy a good distance away from her. The earth wielder came to a stop face down on the terrace floor and didn't move for a few moments, a sight that raised alarm in the Kruna. But when Daisy got up on her hands and knees, the alarm left the Kruna and rose within Marissa.

"Oh, come on..." grumbled Marissa. "YOU JUST WON'T GO AWAY!"

"...Is that the best you can do..." murmured Daisy, getting to her feet.

"What..." Marissa said, almost choking.

In an instant, Daisy straightened herself out and looked directly at Marissa, full of fury. "I said, is that the best you can do?!" she yelled.

"You..." Marissa grunted. "You better WATCH YOUR TONE!"

A sudden ambient shift in momentum occurred when Marissa channeled into her Malocchio Eye in an attempt to control Daisy's mind. Through her mindsight, Marissa saw her influence shoot through the air towards Daisy in first-person view as she forced her will at the Kruna of Earth. To the Kruna, they couldn't notice anything other than the witch's Malocchio glowing. Unknown to the witch, however, Daisy could see the red light of Marissa's influence flying at her. So when Daisy's hair parted to reveal her forehead, Marissa had no response for the teal light that flared above the Kruna of Earth's eyebrows.

The witch saw the red light that represented her will hit Daisy's forehead and disband upon contact, only for the elliptical teal light to remain untouched. All that the other seven Kruna saw from that exchange was a teal flash in front of Daisy that looked like a puddle stabbed with a twisted blade. Daisy's hair returned to its normal Nova Form position, hanging out and over her forehead as the teal light faded.

"Woah! What was that flash?" asked Marut.

"What just happened there?!" Marissa said, practically screeching. "Why are you not crippling under my influence?!"

"My third eye protects me from the effects of yours," said Daisy. "Your mind control tactic failed before it even had a chance to get started."

"Ridiculous," said Marissa. "I see no third eye on your face! I see no eyes in your hands! Are you mocking me?!"

"Inner eye, then," said Daisy. "Semantics. The fact of the matter is, you can't do anything to my mind or spirit with that Malocchio of yours because my inner third eye negates the effects of your physical third eye."

Having heard enough, Marissa growled and screamed into the air, her voice echoing throughout the sky. "That wooden troll Geno taught you that, didn't he?! It figures he would try to pass it down to someone! I should've known! The next time I see him, he's dead!"

"That depends," said Daisy. "You can't kill him if you can't get to him."

"Wha-?!" Marissa shrieked as utter disbelief and shock took over her face. Her mouth hung open as she tried to grasp an adequate response, but after several gasps and grunts that were failed starts of a sentence, she replied, "What's that supposed to mean?!"

"It's over!" exclaimed Lubba. "Marissa has only a fraction of the energy she started off with! And what an awesome reversal with Daisy's inner eye, am I right?"

The Lumas all waited for a response from Rosalina, but the Elder of the Cosmos said nothing. Her concentration remained on the planet below. She looked well-beyond stressed out.

"King Boo has spread himself out from Geno," said Rosalina. "The Kruna need to hurry up. I'm not kidding. It's amazing how much of a

jump in power King Boo has made over the last few weeks."

"Surely they can put an Elemental Seal over Marissa before then," said Lubba.

"They need to be careful," said Rosalina. "Marissa still has some energy left. She's getting desperate, and that means that she's not going to hold back any extreme measures she may have tucked away in her manic mind. Remember; she's been around for centuries. There's no telling how many spells she has learned or what unholy techniques she has kept under wraps; and she has already shown that she has delved deep into the forbidden arts to utilize immoral powers and abilities."

"What kinds of immoral powers and abilities?" asked Lubba. "Would they actually help her in a situation like this, as some sort of last ditch effort?"

"Who knows," said Rosalina. "I believe a better question would be how much energy she has left to utilize the spells she intends to use..."

Marissa gritted her teeth in ever-mounting anger. The fight had dragged on for too long. For her Orb of Mortal Decay and her mind control to both fail was nothing short of frustrating and infuriating. Nothing about Marissa seemed relaxed then and there as she and Daisy stood-off.

"Bah, foolish Nova Form earth wielder..." grumbled Marissa. All of a sudden, a smile crept on her face. "Heh, heh, heh...ironic how it came to this..."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Neva..." breathed Marissa. "She was sure that she'd have figured out the Nova Form by now and have stopped me all by herself. Before you lot came here, she swore up and down that she'd be the one to beat me... But instead, now she's on the sidelines." The demon witch then stared at the Kruna of Ice. "I bet you're bitter that

you're not in Daisy's boots right about now, huh?"

"I don't care," Neva shot back. "As long as you're taken care of and out of the way for good, that's all that matters!"

Marissa narrowed her eyes. "Of course, of course... What was I thinking... Oh, how's the Alkemei Hien treating you?"

Neva gasped and clutched at her pendant. She looked spooked out, for she didn't think Marissa could've noticed. The Alkemei are easy to tell apart when close up but hard to differentiate at a distance.

"Yeah, that's right," said Marissa. "Don't think I didn't notice that pendant around your pretty little neck. Although my Sweeps...well, former Sweeps...did alert me to your affairs in my mansion yesterday. That is to be expected, don't you think? I normally have a stiff penalty for trespassers, you know, but I feel I need to make this verdict a little different-"

"That's enough, Marissa!" Daisy yelled. "You leave everyone out of this! Keep your focus on me!"

Marissa's Malocchio Eye glowed again, accompanied by reverberating laughter. Everything in Neva's vision went negative in color, but only for a moment. As Marissa's will sped toward Neva through the witch's mindsight, a teal light caught it and disbanded it again. Marissa recoiled and staggered a step back as her mindsight snapped back to her normal vision. When the witch looked at Daisy, she saw the earth wielder's forehead reacting the same way it did earlier.

"What? Now what happened?!" Marissa cried. "Don't tell me you protected her too?!"

"I did," said Daisy. "You can't turn any of us against one another! We are not your puppets! We all have free will, just as all the people of Sarasaland do!"

"Only because of me!" snapped Marissa. "I did the dirty work and eliminated your father, liberating them! They will all grovel at my feet just for that one deed I carried out!"

"My dad's still alive, Marissa," Daisy sharply replied. "Donkey Kong got him to a hospital, so he will be back on his feet. He won't be holding any of Sarasaland back anymore."

"Oh please – you honestly think things are going to be better around here with him in charge?" asked Marissa. "How could you possibly think that? We were all against him this whole time."

"...Because for the first time ever... I saw my dad," said Daisy. "I didn't see anyone or anything else but him. And, while I may not understand the how, the why, the when, and the what of it all, I don't need to. In him...I saw a human. He's on the road to recovery, I believe. It's going to take a lot of time and effort to put the past away, but this is a good first step."

Marissa glanced at both Bowser and Andrew and smirked, but said nothing. *I can sense that those two would be the easiest to take control over at this present point in time,* Marissa thought. *But if Daisy counters with her inner eye again, then it won't matter. I can't waste my remaining reserve of energy like that.* She put her focus through her Malocchio Eye's Remote Viewing for a little bit before quickly coming to a decision. *Let's just draw this out then; just for a few more moments. I can stall for a little while longer...*

"You idealistic sap," said Marissa. "Even at the end, you're still Miss Fanciful Little Hero. Always trying to see the good in every little thing will get you nowhere."

"It's gotten me further than you," replied Daisy. Bowser, Warra, Athelstan, Marut, Neva, Ramona, and Andrew all trotted up to stand with Daisy in a semi-circle. "Here's my proof," the Kruna of Earth said. "Yours left, didn't it..."

"How can you stand there and spout such nonsense?" asked Marissa. "I have been around for ages! I have advanced far beyond you! I am better than you! That's it! Nothing else to it!"

"You're right, Marissa," said Daisy. "You are better than me. On any other night, you are. But not tonight. No, I bested you tonight; for my friends both here and in the Mushroom Kingdom, for Sarasaland, for the Comet Observatory and the Great Beings of long ago, and all

the Kruna who came before us...and all the Kruna who came after you."

"You want to know why you lost tonight?" Andrew said to the witch. "You brought all this on yourself. If you don't get it or understand, maybe you should think about what you've done over the course of your life. You'll have eternity to do that."

"Don't you talk to me like that!" yelled Marissa. "You have not beaten me! No bloodbound mortal will! I can not be defeated!"

"We can all sense it," said Daisy. "Your energy signature has faded to a meager fraction of what you had started out with after the Blood Moon. There's no point in continuing this battle any longer-" She swung her right arm up in an arc and thrust it in Marissa's direction. "YOU'VE LOST!"

A collection of Daisy's remaining earth energy flared from her hand and projected itself a short distance away as the rest of the Kruna held out their arms to pool their energy together with Daisy's. In the center of their semi-circle, a glossy, metallic sheen overtook the conglomeration of elemental energy. Marissa tried leaping up into the air but immediately recoiled and flopped onto her butt as a strain in her thigh hampered her mobility and almost paralyzed her with pain.

"Prepare to spend the rest of your infinite immortal life encased in this Elemental Seal!" Daisy yelled. "You will never escape the energized crystalline-metalloid structure of this impenetrable prison!"

Unable to come up with anything else to do, Marissa knelt on one knee and focused her remaining energy through a single hand sign. When she turned to look at the Sarasaland Campanile, she took a deep breath and concentrated her mystic power harder. The eight Kruna had gathered a massive, rainbow-colored spheroid of elemental energy in front of their outstretched hands, and it continued to grow.

There's but one thing I can do now, thought Marissa. *But I need a lot of luck, and I have to do this perfectly...*

As the Kruna's collective elemental energy took on a bright shine, Marissa began to execute a series of hand signs while reciting specific syllables. It seemed on every exact second that passed, she switched to a different hand sign and uttered another syllable different from the previous one. The sound of bells filled the air as a white circle appeared around Marissa and counted each hand sign she made with a dash just within the outside of its border. But in her hesitation, Marissa both said a syllable out of turn and didn't switch her hand sign. As a result, the circle around her cleared the circumferential dash marks.

Damn, I already messed up! Marissa screamed in her mind. *Start over!*

While Marissa did her best to execute her divine spell, the Kruna readied their combined elemental powers and took aim at her. Marissa had only finished her twenty-sixth hand sign when the Kruna all looked at her. She was too late to do anything.

"It's over!" yelled Daisy. "You're through!"

Just then, a whirl of white blur streaked in front of Marissa and drifted to a slow hover before releasing a swath of darkness that rose up from the terrace floor. The wall of red and green melded shadow cut off the Kruna from Marissa and rose high into the air. Unable to see either Marissa or the newcomer, the Kruna withdrew their remaining elemental energy back within themselves and stared at the wildly flaring dark barrier.

Before any of the Kruna could do anything further, a colossal, dark Shocker Sphere ripped through the shadow wall. The attack moved too fast, and the eight elemental wielders stood too close together. As a result, the powerful technique struck all the Kruna and blasted them toward the end of the Bellbridge Terrace opposite the Sarasaland Campanile. All of a sudden, the momentum had made a complete reversal yet again as it had done numerous times already that night. When the wall of shadow eroded, Umbra King Boo hovered just offset of Marissa, who now knelt in a circle with sixty evenly-spaced dash marks glowing in her white circle.

"Hurry up, and finish whatever it is you're doing!" King Boo said to

Marissa. "I ditched Geno, but I bet he's rushing over here as fast as he can!"

The Kruna all were slow to get up. They tried forcing themselves back to their feet as quickly as they could, but King Boo's attack had dealt a number on all of them. The ghost could not have placed a more accurate, well-timed burst.

Only making it to a foot, a hand, and a knee, Daisy looked down and saw an identical circle form around her and her team both in the terrace floor and overhead. The other Kruna had begun to notice the same thing. A sheath of streaky, ethereal yellow light emerged from the clock of the Sarasaland Campanile and extended down and across the Bellbridge Terrace to connect with the two circles over and under the Kruna.

"What sorcery is this?" asked Bowser.

"It's a trap!" screamed Marut. "We gotta move!"

"Too late!" Marissa howled. Her Malocchio Eye flashed, and for a split second, the witch's body took on a double-vision appearance in the eyes of the Kruna before everything in their sight doubled on them.

Then the Kruna froze in place; not for any other reason besides the fact that they couldn't move under their own will. The circles beneath and above them drifted upwards and downwards respectively to faze through each other, then they faded away as they continued on their path. Without any further delay, the Kruna got flung at the Sarasaland Campanile's clock as a gear-shaped portal emerged and opened in front of it. In just seconds, the eight helpless elemental wielders passed through the portal and entered the dark, windy passage within.

"See you all in eight years!" shouted Marissa, waving her hands at the campanile's clock. "Bye-bye for now!"

The portal shrank and close, diminishing and disappearing after having served its purpose. No trace of the Kruna remained. Not even their energy signatures could be sensed. For a while, silence

dominated the scene. Marissa stood up, the clock-like circle around her already gone. She and King Boo stared at the campanile's clock for a couple moments. The flurries had stopped falling, and the auroras overhead brightened even more than before. A long, stretched-out cosmic nebula became visible in the sky behind the full moon and all the auroras.

"Wretched young blood rebels," the demon witch muttered. "That Chronos Aeon spell exhausted all of my remaining power. For it all to recharge and restore is going to take a while, but it had to be done."

"Recovery items are in abundance down in the streets," said King Boo. "That oughta...expedite the process. It's not like any one of those pedestrians or soldiers or rouge vigilantes down there who stayed behind would be able to stop either one of us."

"No one," replied Marissa. Her rate of speech slowed, as if a sort of stoic euphoria took over her being. "The dark arts, forbidden spells, powers deemed immoral and too dangerous for the public... Pursuing these has got me this far...but only a few have I mastered. Learning more will open the way to more possibilities... And I will have all the time in the world to learn them all...and to create new ones."

"That's all well and fine, but there are two certain *specific people* I'm looking to eradicate sometime soon."

"Of course, you've spoken of your hate for them many times. But after that, then what will you do, King Boo?"

The ghost paused for a moment before giving his reply. He wondered where Kokoro was, for the Soul Stealer still had the Master Pendant in his possession. "We'll just have to wait and see what time does."

Marissa smiled and licked blood off one of her arms with her tongue in one long trace of the limb. She then sucked on her lips and took a deep breath, looking satisfied. "Now I am free to smite and conquer as the Shadow Queen and Osiris did so many centuries ago," the witch murmured. "Every last inferior, meek, feeble little mortal on

this rock will know my name...forever... And I will be the one to usher in and establish a new world order. They should have seen it coming. This world has bred evil since its inception, but now, it will submit to the combined might of the malevolent forces of past and present that have contributed to my power through the reservoir that is the Blood Moon."

King Boo wasn't sure, but Marissa's tone did not sound as triumphant or proud as he expected it to be. Though she sounded glad, she also seemed so muted that it was as if a somber, forlorn undertone lay hidden in her voice and mannerisms. To King Boo, it had only served to make the already creepy, demented demon witch all the more disturbing and deranged. *No telling what she's got in store for this world,* King Boo thought. *But whatever it is, I can safely say that it's not going to be anything short of horrendous... Maybe when I steal the Master Pendant from Kokoro, I'll hightail it outta here. I've already developed more than enough power with her help...*

Marissa turned away from the Sarasaland Campanile to stare out over the central and southern portions of Sarasaland. Stretching her arms out to her sides, she looked out into the distance, and then up into the sky. Though the Nirvana Barrier wouldn't be noticeable for at least a few days, it was well underway in building up and spreading out to be exactly what she had described earlier.

Marissa closed her eyes for a little while and took another deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, she gazed upon the land below and ahead with a steady but dangerous simper. "Time to do something about this eyesore of a planet," she said. "...Let the future...begin..."